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To Helen

with wishes of much joy
and lasting happiness.

from

Uncle Edwin

December 1924.

BARBED WIRE
AND WAYFARERS



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TORONTO

BARBED WIRE AND WAYFARERS

BY
EDWIN FORD PIPER

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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER
PIONEERS IN NEBRASKA
IN THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND
SIXTY-NINE

To the editors of the following magazines thanks are due for very courteous permission to reprint certain poems in this book: *The Midland*, *The Measure*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *Contemporary Verse*, *The Stratford Journal*, and *The Iowa Alumnus*.

PREFATORY NOTE

MEN are traditionally fond of places which gave them rich and varied experience: our pioneers delight in memories of the struggle with a new country. Of accuracy in the account they are not unnaturally jealous. The mover's wagon, the fording of rivers, the dry buffalo bones in the grass, the reticence of cowboys—how remote from the romancer interested in his own gestures.

"Barbed Wire" was long in mind before it took form in verse. Its pictures and sketches lend significance to one another and are best read in order. The poems which under the title "Barbed Wire" ran serially in *The Midland* throughout the year 1917 have undergone slight revisions for this issue; the book, twice published by the Midland Press, is out of print. The title is neither a fancy nor a symbol; barbed wire won the land from the cowman for the homesteader.

The "Barbed Wire" country lies west of the Missouri; its years are the early eighties.

Prefatory Note

"Wayfarers," later in the same decade, is about men walking through the settlement on the road to Denver, The Black Hills. Bits of folk-song from their lips color some of the lyric refrains. "Echoes from the War" and "Hours in a Bye-Street" bring a miscellany of lyrics and sketches into the volume.

E. F. P.

CONTENTS

BARBED WIRE

	PAGE
THE MOVERS	1
BY THE ROAD	3
DRY BONES	4
ONCE ON A TIME	6
THE LAST ANTELOPE	8
THE COWBOY	10
WHOA, ZEBE, WHOA	12
THE SETTLER	14
THE HORSE THIEF	16
BARBED WIRE	22
THE WELL	24
I. WATER BARRELS	24
II. THE WINDMILL	26
III. THE WELL DIGGER	27
BREAKING SOD	31
THE SOD HOUSE	32
THE DROUGHT	34
THE FORD AT THE RIVER	35

Contents

	PAGE
THE PRAIRIE FIRE	37
THE BOY ON THE PRAIRIE	40
ANNIE	43
THE GRASSHOPPERS	46
THE SCHOOLMISTRESS	48
THE RIVER ONCE MORE	53
TEN CENTS A BUSHEL	57
THREE PER CENT. A MONTH	59
MEANWHILE	61
THE CHURCH	66

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

HAVE YOU AN EYE	71
THE RIDGE FARM	73
IN THE CANYON	79
ROAD AND PATH	93
THE NEIGHBORHOOD	95
THE BANDED	99
NATHAN BRIGGS	102
MISTER DWIGGINS	106
THE CLAIM-JUMPER	111
I. AT HER DUGOUT	111
II. THE JUMPER	114
III. JARVIS WAITED	120
JOE TAYLOR	122

Contents

	PAGE
SHOES	127
IN THE POTATO FIELD	128
THE PARTY	133
MOON WORSHIP	133
I. THE GATHERING	133
II. THE GAMES	136
THE KEY	141
THE DRIVER	143
I. AT THE POST-OFFICE	143
II. IN A PUBLIC PLACE	149
III. THE MAN WITH THE KEY ONCE MORE	154

WAYFARERS

BY THE WAVING WHEAT	161
WAYFARERS	164
I. THE SUNFLOWER THICKET	164
II. BUFFALO BOB AND MOONEY GEORGE	167
III. THE FIGHT	176
IV. THE WELL	179
COUNTY LODGINGS	181
JOHNNY COOK	183
THE TRAMP'S BOY	188
QUARRYMAN'S JOY	189
BREACHY	190

Contents

	PAGE
CASUALS	192
I. ADVENT	192
DOWN WHEAT	195
II. NASHVILLE RABBIT'S STORY	200
UNDER ROOF	205
III. BULLWHEEL MIKE	206
BREAD AND CUP	213
IV. THE CONFESSION OF CHI BOOKER	215
BILL NINETOES	225
BALM	227
V. THE LAST OF BALTIMORE THUMB	228
OLD MAN WINTER	234
JOE	236
I. THE CABIN	236
II. JOE'S ACCOUNT	239
III. LODGINGS	241
IV. ACCESSORY	243
BURYIN' OLD LONG TOM	244
BINDLESTIFF	246
TIE-PASS	250

ECHOES FROM THE WAR

THE FIRST FROM ANTIOCH JUNCTION	253
"BROTHERS, WON'T YOU JOIN US NOW?"	255
SOLDIER BOY	257

Contents

	PAGE
A SEDUCIOUS NAME	258
"GEE-UP DAR, MULES"	260
WINTER DUSK	263

HOURS IN A BYE-STREET

BYE-STREET	267
"I'LL GO A PIECE WITH YOU"	268
BY THE KITCHEN FIRE	270
MARCH WIND	271
QUEER NAME	275
"OH—OH"	276
THE CHANGELING	278
A HOUSE	281
SONG	282
DECLARATION	283
THIS LITTLE WHILE	284
LOW VOICES	285
THE LAST GOODNIGHT OF BUCKHORSE JOHN .	286
THE LINE FENCE	287
SWEETGRASS RANGE	289
UNFORGOTTEN	290
LATE DUSK	291

BARBED WIRE

BARBED WIRE AND WAYFARERS

THE MOVERS

THE meadow-larks rejoice, as the bright
sun
Drinks up the burdening dew from slender
grass,
From flower cups, purple, yellow, white, and
blue,
On the green hill-slopes where the dusty trail
Lies like a loose gray ribbon. Westward creeps
The jolting prairie schooner, and its wheels
Talk on the axle while the sweating bays
Draw sturdily, nodding their patient heads.
Humping between spring seat and canvas roof
The bearded, weather-beaten driver guides
With slackened line. An eager boy and girl—
The lass with yellow curls, the lad well
tanned—
Peer close beside him. From the hidden
depths

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Comes the low crooning of a lullaby.
The meadow-larks rejoice, the wild flowers
 blow—
He eyes the dusty margin of the trail
Communing with his vision of a home.

BY THE ROAD

THE dusty wheels have left the rutted road
For the shelter of the elm tree. Boy
and girl,

Glad to stretch muscles cramped the whole day
long,

Explore the brook bank; from the camp-fire
smoke

A kneeling woman shields her eyes; the smell
Of savory meat and coffee calls the man
From mending harness; on the wood grass
sweet

The horses' mouths are noisy; golden light
Sifts through the lower elm leaves, and afar
The quail gives challenge, and the wood dove
mourns.

The symphony of night lays starry glooms
Upon the open spaces. Overhead,
The faintest stream of air goes trickling slow
Among the sleeping leaves, while in the dew
The blossomed grape and elderberry drip
With honeyed fragrance. In such luxury
The movers lie under the smiling stars
One night more on the road to the new land.

DRY BONES

SPRINGTIME outran the furrowings of
raw sod;

There must be bread: in August the bonepickers
Go harvesting the prairie, dragging out—

Rich roof for hundred-legs and scurrying
beetles—

From the fingers of the grass and spiderweb
Long curving rib and broad white shoulder-
blade.

They pay a dollar for a ton in town.

The square, squat houses, the low shedlike
stores

Weathering unpainted, toe the littered street
That finds the railway station. By the track,
A fenced lot heaped with bleaching skele-
tons,—

Mountainous wreckage, shin and back confused,
Crowned with horned skulls grotesquely menac-
ing.

Dry Bones

So ends the buffalo. Five years since he tossed
In great earth-shaking herds his shaggy mane;
Now not one calf. Once furious bulls did roar
The challenge moving terribly to fight.

Dry bones—the price one dollar for a ton.

ONCE ON A TIME

ONCE on a time the plain with breeze and
sun
On wild brown herds a-grazing where the trails
Wind to the living water; *once* is done,—
Once is the chosen word of old wives' tales.

The keen-faced Indian, arrow to bent bow,
Steers on the hounding pony with his knees,
Outriding some huge thundering buffalo
That he may couch on robe, and feast at ease.

With needlegun the sportsman, jaunty, brisk,
Three before breakfast slaughters; lets them
lie;
Writes in his diary. Still the yearlings frisk
As to the waterholes the herds roll by.

The buffalo skinner stacks the reeking pelt;
One stench of rotting carcass drowns the plain;
Buzzard and coyote, ant and fly have smelt
The offence, but all their scavengery is vain

Once on a Time

To sweeten any breeze. The hireling skins
Fresh kill and noisome carrion in his greed,
Glutting, the while, his fancy on the sins
His dirty pay in his cheap soul may breed.

Once on a time the rival bulls did roar
Their fighting challenge; once—O nevermore!

THE LAST ANTELOPE

BEHIND the board fence at the banker's
house
The slender, tawn-gray creature starves and
thirsts

In agony of fear. A dog may growl,
It cowers; the cockcrow shakes it with alarm.

White frost lay heavy on the buffalo grass
That winter morning when three graceful
shapes

Slipped by the saddle-back across the ridge
Along the rutted pathway to the creek.
In former years the track was bare, and worn
With feet of upland creatures every day.
A boy spied these three outlaws. Two hours'
chase,

Fifty pursuers, and the ways all stopped,—
Guns, dogs, and fences. Torn by the barbed
wire,

Drilled by a dozen buckshot, one; the next,
O'erheaped by snapping jaws, cried piteously
An instant; but the last on treacherous ice
Crashed through, a captive.

The Last Antelope

Ropes—the jolting wagon—
Its heart was audible as you touched its fur.

Behind the board fence at the banker's house,—
O, once it capered wild on dewy grass
In grace and glee of dancing, arrowy bounds!—
At the banker's house, behind the high board
fence
The last slim pronghorn perishes of fear.

THE COWBOY

*"O once in my saddle I used to go dashing,
O once in my saddle I used to be gay!"*

BELTED with Colt and cartridge, spur on
heel,
The tall, spare form is tricked for holiday,
With bowlegs curved in buckskins, a snake's
hide
Banding his hat, while round his leaning neck,
Half hidden by the curling, sunburnt hair,
A silken rainbow rolls to a large gold ring.
Sun-browned mustache half hides his laughing
mouth.

Mexican dollars shine as the rosettes
On saddle and braided bridle. Let him mount!
In his long stirrups with what ease he takes
The pony's motion, while it moves at speed
Snatches the trailing lariat!

Of his skill
To rope and ride he is silent, and his gun
Stays in his belt till needed. He can swear,

The Cowboy

Can lose unruffled six months' pay at cards,
Bestow in nameless bounty his last cent,
And spite of wind, and dust, and Texas steers,
And undiluted whiskey, still can sing
In the night wind the longhorn's lullaby.

By innate force of spirit he is kin
To old adventurers. While trick and trade,
And blue-sky lots made fat the souls and speech
Of men, this romantic rebel, sick of smugness
And cheatery, let his birthright blessing go,
Wild for a free life, the pony, and the range.

He might have been conductor,—congressman
With a post-office named after him; he is
Unstable as water, loyal to the death,
A creature of impulse, and he still can sing;
Not quite a grown-up spite of forty years.

WHOA, ZEBE, WHOA

SADDLE me up the Zebra Dun—
Whoa, Zebe, whoa!

Double-cinch the son of a gun—

Whoa, till I bridle you, whoa!

Foot in the stirrup, straddle him quick—

Pitch and squeal and buck and kick—

Take your gait or the spurs will prick,

Lope along, you Zebra Dun!

The boys are off for town tonight—

It's a-riding Zebra Dun!

Playing poker and a-getting tight—

Sift along, O Zebra Dun!

Bunch of girls at Brown's hotel

Knows the steps, and dances well—

Rattlesnake Pete and his fiddle—

Lope along, O Zebra Dun!

Lights of the town are a-shining clear—

Run, you Zebra Dun!

Last four weeks seems like a year—

Run, Zebe, run!

Yip, yip, yi-yi, yi-yi!

Whoa, Zebe, Whoa

*Run, you old stiff-kneed grasshopper,
You spiral-spined jackrabbit, you!*

A-ho, whoopee!

Brown's Hotel we're bound to see,
Swing them girls at the dance party,
One-and-twenty on a moonlight spree—

A-ho, whoopee!

Whoa, Zebe, whoa!

Whoa, till I hitch you, whoa!

THE SETTLER

IN Westertown a statue rules the square,
The settler as the sculptor visioned him.
Nor slender, nor yet massive; sinewy,
Bearded, erect, broad-shouldered, hand on
spade,
Shirt sleeve uprolled on muscular forearm,
Alert eye, and compassionate faithful lip,
And forehead answering joyfully to the sky
The yes-word.

Such is the image. The real man
Is fat, is scrawny, is Apollo-like;
Glares like a hawk, blinks like some bleary pig,
Moves like a Victory, hirkles like a hare.
The spirits of the just are perfected;
The sculptor carves ideal form in stone.

Nay, the real settler is not simply man;
But wife and child in laughing, loving group
Lead the celestial sunshine of man's dreams
Which he names home. And after them in
troops,

The Settler

The beast and bird that own man's mastery
Graze the new pastures to his comforting;
While afar, hover arts that minister
To the spirit, lingering till the plough shall
 break
The thorny wilderness to the fruitful field.

THE HORSE THIEF

I

BY the ditch in the hollow stands the tree,
A cottonwood with deeply wrinkled bark
About its mighty trunk, and limbs that spread,
And leaves that gleam and shimmer in the sun,
The oracle of any moody breeze.

Aloft, the bee-bird spies; here orioles sing,—
In vain we boys risked necks to reach their
 nests,

To see, touch, boast of—O, no thievery.

Here in a gentle wind the body swayed.
His hands were bound behind, and his dead
 weight

Dangled with feet not far above the ground
Where the sombrero lay brim uppermost.

His shoes were frayed by grass blades; a gold
 ring

Shone from one hand; about his blackened
 throat

The gay silk kerchief loosely knotted lay.

The rope was higher, right against his chin.

The Horse Thief

A boyish face, scarce bearded, but now marked
With the last agony in those bursting eyes,
A glassy blue, mouth drawn in grinning pain
To show with what a struggle life broke loose
From his young body. Yet his soft brown hair
Was neatly parted, just one lock waved low
Over the forehead. All of this we saw
While men sought out a tool to cut the rope.

II

His watch contained a picture I was told,
They thought his mother's, but they could not
find

A hint. No doubt the horse thief saw to that,
Took comfort thence. The prison cells are full
Of men who veil themselves with alias
Lest kindred share disgrace. And nameless
graves,

And vagabonds in exile! Lost, and lost!
Perhaps this whole long winter evening
through,

While the wood fire hums its low, sad tune,
And the knitting needles click, and the open
page

Is scarcely turned, father and mother muse
Of the boy who vanished alive in the strange
wild land.

Was it for love, or hate, or avarice?
Or untamed blood that wantons in the breast,
Spurring the soul to pass all barriers
As it had wings, not limping feet of clay,

The Horse Thief

That brought him to the unmarked, grassy'
mound

They call the horse thief's grave? We shall
not know.

III

"Old Gray gone? Why, we loved him human-like!"

"It's thirty miles with loads to market, store!"

"The plough rusts in the furrows!" "Ripened wheat

Must fall for birds!" "He is professional, Outrides pursuit, and makes horse stealing pay!"

"A gang with stations!"

O, a dozen like
Reasons of sentiment and poise. Did such
Lead twenty men to coolly hang this boy?
Or did some underlying passion burn
Their hearts, flare up in cruelty?

Hear, and judge.
He answered or kept silence as he would,
Without manhandling, till the proof of guilt
Cast its black shadow. Slowly to the tree,
His captors all rode mute. The thief might
pray,

The Horse Thief

Or plead or curse. By glimmering lantern light
He stands in the saddle while the rope is tied;
The leader speaks, the horses start, the dark
Enfolds the dangling struggler.

Custom this;
Stark custom, wherein rough men harden heart
Melting so kindly to the desperate plea
For mercy. This youth knew what path he
chose;
Played life against the slipnoose snare and lost.
The people judged, and carried out their law,
Effecting sentence rather than revenge.

Their law takes life for that which money
buys?

Unduly harsh, perhaps. Consider this:
What money has the settler, and wherewith
Shall he make purchase? Livelihood and life,
From settler and his family? Death to thieves!
Of course, rope won't reform a horse thief's
soul,

But it warns stealers of such heavy risk
A man can tie his team on grass at night
And find it in the morning. Life is life—
Nor cheaper here than in the city streets,
Except to those who covet horse,—or rope.

BARBED WIRE

THE prairie cleft by skirmish lines of
fence—

High-headed longhorns bound for pastures
new—

Torn denim fluttering and profane dispraise—
The sod house and the ranks of silking corn,
But, oh, the crippled horses at the plough!

Dobbin was mettlesome two years ago;
But he'll prance no more, he'll never kick up
his heels,

For one knee crooks out, one leg has a dragging
limp;

He's notched and scarred with gashes. Gray's
front foot

Is doubled in size, stiff, lumpy, hairless, too.
The poor colt flung that hoof over the fence,
And pulled and sawed for hours. The pine tar
With which we filled the wound did heal it up.
Horses are horses. Curses on barbed wire!

When longhorns broke their way through
blossoming wheat

Barbed Wire

Or rioted over the rows of young green corn
Herd law denied the settler damages
Unless his crop was fenced. Hail to barbed
wire!

It broke the free range, sent the cowman
west,—

Cowboys in dimmer distance, riding, riding
Into rich sunset light whence lingering notes
Drift over dusky distances of trail.

“Come on, old Slowfoot, sift along,
We got to make Mud River tonight.
Your ribs is lank and your hair is long,
But a month on the range’ll put you right.

“You’re going to wish for the bluestem hay,
And the buffalo grass so sweet and high;
But you’ll get a home on the Cactus Range
If you don’t strike too much alkali.

“Good-bye, good-bye to the Frenchman Fork,
To the sandbar mush they call the Platte;
We’ll make our home in the sagebrush hills
Till the devil puts a fence on that.

“They say that heaven is a free range land,—
Good-bye, good-bye, O fare you well,—
But it’s barbed wire for the devil’s hat band;
And barbed wire blankets down in hell.”

THE WELL

*The brimming bucket at my mouth—
Coolness of water!
In all my veins the heat, the drouth,—
O, the well water!*

I

WATER BARRELS

WITHIN the lumber wagon by the well
The barrels stand, and little snowflakes
drive

Across them while the pulley groans and creaks
As on the stubborn frozen rope, the wrists
Of the hauler lean till the bucket clears the
curb.

He seizes the bail, and drags, and strains tiptoe
To reach above the barrel. Dribblets wet
His garments through and stiffen into ice.
Seventy buckets and done! Cover the barrels.
Three miles of windy road! The nervous bays
Surge heavily on the bits, while numb hands
ache

The Well

Holding them in lest jolting waste the water.
The driver walks. Meanwhile the pulley
 laboring

Over the fifty feet from bucket to bucket
Groans on in the snow to serve another hauler.
The upland wells will be deep, they are long
 a-digging;

So wagons rattle down with the empty water
 barrels,

And wagons creep heavily home with the
 barrels sloshing.

Yes, I did hear. If,—if there came a fire?
Be still! To that no one but God can answer.

II

THE WINDMILL

Yes, July heat. You'll drink another dipper.
The old wheel creaks and strains. Give her
good breezes,
She spins around as pretty as a picture.
And it blows every day as if to keep
Our hundred barrel tank full to the brim.
Two hundred feet, and half the depth hard
rock, sir.
Yes, dug. A sizable hole; you see that dirt
pile.
A dollar for each foot down, and board and
lodging;
He took his five months' wages, bought an
eighty.
O yes, we lived here while the well was digging;
Each day for stock and house we hauled three
barrels.
It grew a little stale, sucked up a wood taste;
Now this comes clear and cold from porous
sandstone,
And on a hot day—there, the tank runs over.

III

THE WELL DIGGER

*"Spring up, O well;
Sing ye unto it:
The princes digged the well,
The nobles of the people digged it,
By the direction of the lawgiver,
With their staves."*

Numbers XXI, 17, 18.

Jim surely did not look much like a prince;
As—owning no horse—he toiled with a sack of
flour

Six miles across the prairie to his soddy.
He stopped at our place, wiped the sweat away;
His Adam's apple shuttling as he held
The dipper long to his mouth while he sat
stooped

In a big chair in the shadow of the house.
A tall, thin, wiry man with rusty beard,
Flat nose, and scrawny brows over hollow eyes
Glinting with fire.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"Sonny, I dug this well."

"It's a good well, Jim."

"You bet she is, damn good!
My wells dug end on end would make a mile."

"Did you like digging?"

"No, I won't say like.
Paid me when pay was scarce. Too much
stone-grit;
Bad for the lungs. They lower pretty slow
So that the rope won't spin you on the walls.
You look up, see a silver dime of the sky
Crossed by the windlass. You don't know the
sky
Till you see her from a well hole. And your
voice
Answers the tender with a boomin' sound
As if from seventy barrels. If he kicks
Some grains of gravel, stings you worse'n hail
At a hundred feet."

"Anything ever fall?"

"Yes, yes. I was a diggin' Blakesley's well.
I hunch myself up closer than the most,
And make a hole that's only three foot ten

The Well

'Stead of four feet. It saves a heap o' dirt.
Down ninety foot, his brother tendin' me.
We used a nail keg with a bail of wire;
I filled it with small stone, he drewed it up
Most of the way. I heard a kind of swish,
Looked, saw her comin'. Yes, the wire had
broke—

Got bent wrong, snapped. Kebunk, kebunk,
kebunk,

She hit first one then tother side. I stood
Flat to the wall in no time, and kewhiz,
The nail keg took my shirt a glancing blow.
Buttons and cloth and hide went. Good I'm
thin.

I fell on the bucket in a shower of stones.
No, I didn't feel 'em, didn't know a thing.
My breast was black for three weeks. 'N' I
said then

'I work hereafter where I've room to dodge;
I don't want all hell a-fallin' on my head
Without a hole to run to.' Then they got
A drill machine' bout seven miles below.
It drills 'em. 'N' I quit. My wife was after
me

To quit before."

"Jim, tell me what you thought
When you saw her comin'."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"Think? There wasn't time.
I thought, if she hits she makes a pancake of
me.

Thin, to the wall!"

"Was that the only time?"

"I must be movin'! Another dipper, sonny."

"But weren't you often afraid the rope might
break?"

"No, hardly ever. Your mind is on your work.
Once a week, maybe, it would come to me,
If she caves,—good-bye. Yes, once she caved.

"My gosh!
I got to travel. Thank you, that's good
water—
Some other time, boy. Home by noon. Good-
bye."

BREAKING SOD

THE level field of gray-green buffalo grass
Still narrows as the sweating bays plod
on,
And that black ribbon at the ploughtail rolls
Beside its drier neighbor. Clevis gear
And doubletree complain while the plough
sings,
Shearing through grass roots, burying weed and
flower,
Unhousing worm and grub for eager beaks,
The blackbird and the meadow-lark that flit
To the heels of the ploughman.

Never any more
Shall wild flock pasture here on grasses wild;
But bearded wheat shall flourish, corn shall ear,
The weeds shall burr and blossom, strong bat-
talions.
And man shall serve the land in hunger and
sorrow,
Worship and love the bounteous, old earth-
mother,
Rejoicing in the furrows of his field.

THE SOD HOUSE

THE hoofbeats sound, the harness clacks
and clinks,
The wagon rattles in the frosty air
Along the level prairie road that swings
To the low, dark bulk whereon the sodded roof
Bristles with meager, winter-beaten weeds.
Before it, ranks of whiplike trees stand guard;
Behind lie cribs, straw sheds, the well, the
woodpile,
And the garden square fenced in by a goose-
berry hedge
From weathering stalks and stubble. The
house front
Shows but two windows and one deep-set door.
How plain the lines of old gray grass that check
Layer from layer all the mud-brown wall
Though rain, and wind, and sun, and frost have
crumbled
The edges from the sods. A visitor
May pass the gable to lift the home-made latch
Of the lean-to kitchen buttressing the rear.

The Sod House

What warmth! How smooth and clean the
earthen floor!

The low room shines with kitchen-gear in order.
The living room is curtained. Smooth, bright
boards

Overlie the dressed log rafters; braided rugs
Bless the pine floor, and homely chairs draw
near

To table, stove, and bookshelf. Last and best,
Within the window's deep recesses, flowers,
Wax plant, geranium, fuchsia, and oxalis,
Full-blossomed spite of every wintry wind.

THE DROUGHT

THE light of noon comes reddened from
a sky

A-blur with dust; the irritable wind
Burns on your cheek, and leans against your
garments

Like a hot iron. Cloud after cloud, the dust
Sweeps the road, rattles on the dirty canvas
Of the schooner so dispiritedly drawn
By drooping horses. On the whitening grass,
With bright and helpless eyes, a meadow-lark
Sits open-beaked, and desperately mute.

The thin, brown wheat that was too short to cut
Stands in the field; the feeble corn, breast high,
Shows yellowed leaf and tassel. With slack
line

The bearded, gaunt, stoop-shouldered driver
sits

As if in sleep some mounting wave of sorrow
Had overpassed him, and he still dreamed on.
Within the schooner children's voices wail;
A mother's tones bring quiet. The sun glares,
The wind drones and makes dirty all the sky.
The horses scarcely fight the vicious flies.

This is departure, but there are who stay.

THE FORD AT THE RIVER

THROUGH thin, gray, moving clouds a
summer sun

Lies like dull silver on the rippled stream.

Now gusts alarm, now quiet stills the leaves

That shade the steep bank where the wagon
presses

The shrinking team to splash in belly deep.

The wagon sways, a breeze tugs at our hats,

And the clear water, clutching near our feet

The wheel-spokes, spins on into roilly flurries.

Our hearts beat fast. It deepens now, and
strikes

The tongue, the tugs, the box-floor, spurts up in

The lurching wagon, as over hidden hole

And treacherous dip we venture. The box lifts,

The current drags, the horses well-nigh swim,

We speak not, scarcely breathe.

It shallows fast;

The horses' knees splash out and in, we near

The gravel bar, the water lets us go;

We drip across bright sand to the weedy road

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Under the singing leaves, still looking back
To the dull silver water, and the minutes
Vibrant with beatings of the heart.

A bridge
Echoes to dry-shod feet, but in the fordway
Man grapples still the spirit of the stream.

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

O, the red tongues! The leavings of the fire!

RED sunshine in October's smoky air
With all dry grasses rustling in the breeze
Where fireguards saved them. But most fields
and hills
Lie black, and one can smell and taste burned
grass.

Grim landscape, grim as death! Leavings of
fire!
Wild things to whom the grass was as a forest
Woven with saving colors, naked, famishing,
Face sharp-eyed foes. Next season's bud is
scorched,
Her butterfly roasted. Only the green-lobed
cactus,
Cooked to pale yellow, writhes half dead.

Red sunshine,
When yesterday that pillar of leaning smoke
On the north wind staggering down scared
every eye.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Men ran to the furrows to kindle wavering
lines
Of backfire that must eat against the wind
To meet the blaze racing through delicate
grass
A-flash like tinder. Desperately they ran
With water and cloth to beat at the flying flame
While arms might swing, or eyes or lungs
endure
The pain of the burning air. And where blue-
stem grew
The flame rose yards, and the counter-fires
leaped
Whirling, and their red wings embracing lifted
them
Into the roaring smoke.

O, the red leaping!
Covertless coyote and rabbit went scurrying,
Little gray birds in pockets of fire
Fell blinded and crazy, the while enormous
Tumbleweeds ablaze came rolling, rolling,
rolling
Over the widest guards.

O, the red sunshine!
Wreckage and ashes where wheat ricks
clustered ready,

The Prairie Fire

With the threshing machine among them.
That mound was a barn;
The straw heaped over poles flared up like a
torch;
A youth rushed in to rescue his horse, but the
creature
Wild-eyed with stupor and terror kept leaping
and cowering.
We heard his voice ring out from the roar of
the red tongues.
Ashes covered their bones.

The leavings of fire!
The smile in his eyes, the laughter, the soft
boyish mouth—

Yesterday's sunshine!
The praise from his sweetheart, the tunes of
the first adoration

A-ripple, a-dance in his breast—
O, the leavings of fire!

THE BOY ON THE PRAIRIE

AT thirteen he first saw a railway train
With all the amazing violence of the
wheels,
And the coughing engine, and the rebuking bell,
A theme for round-eyed wonder. He could
ride
A bucking pony, cut strange toys in wood,
Braid hair or leather into lasso knot,
Dive, swim, throw stones,—lacked mates for
bat and ball—
But with a rifle could behead a quail,
Such lore men taught him.

And he whiled long hours
Of lonely sunshine with his horse and dog;
Their hearty love dilating soft, bright eyes,
Pricking the glossy ears,—their comradeship
In quiverings, poisings of graceful bodies,
Plain, age-old words of the beasts.

He learned to read
The look and life of all that roamed the wild;

The Boy on the Prairie

Where the first elm seeds showered on April
grass,
Why creatures slipped through thicket, or stir-
less, hid;
Where coyotes denned, how plover nest on the
ground,
Two pear-shaped eggs the color of grass in
dust,
Open to sight, so hard to see.

And he knew
The frowns and benedictions of the sky;
Whether piled thunderheads bridged all the
blue,
Or horsetails wavered in the path of wind,
Or solid gray led up the long, long rain.
He saw the earth arrayed in all its hours;
The level sun laugh in the morning dew
A-shimmer on each grass-blade while bare feet
Were happy in that coolness; he saw the snow
One dazzle under winter sunlight shoot
A flickering rainbow in rebellious eyes.

Sometimes he read the weekly newspaper;
And winter evenings helped him into books.
On him the Ancient Mariner cast a spell;

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

The Lady of the Lake answered his horn;
He struck the proudest blow in Chevy Chase,
Linking the while Kit Carson, Daniel Boone,
With Grant and Lincoln as his greatest men.

ANNIE

MAYBE nine years, her hair in yellow
braids,
Blue eyes that smiled and wondered. Unto her
The prairie had a spirit; its wild dells
Might catch you, lose you; and its pathless
slopes
Swung twenty miles, and melting into sky
Curtained a world of marvels.

She had heard
Her father and her mother speak of such.
The pictures, too, in the geography
Entranced her. How conceive Gibraltar Rock,
Straight up a hundred times as high as the
house?
The water roared and foamed at Hinton's
Dam;
Niagara then—? And her one fairy book
Read all to pieces, rendered little clue
To the wide prairies and their witchery.

She heard the crane's cry, and the wild goose
note,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

The grouse make love at dawn ere April came,
The groans of nighthawks, screaming of kill-
deer,
Twittering of swallows, blackbirds' cheerful
call.

The flowers were her good gossips; violets,
The buffalo peas, sheep sorrel, spiderwort;
The milky sheen of poppies, red moss rose
A mellow velvet, spikes of blazing star;
The evening primrose delicately pale;
The Spanish bayonet's spire of drooping bells;
The sensitive plant's red ball o'erspiced with
gold;

Voluptuous yellow of the honey cup
The cactus guards; plain-thinking goldenrod.

For playmates a cat, solemnity on four legs,
And a doll for which her needle made awkward
seams.

She read and wrote, filled pages with criss-cross,
Knitted on spools, helped mother, hunted eggs;
Learned one by one all the beatitudes,
About, A Psalm of Life, and Lucy Gray;
Was patient over faults in featherstitch
If mother's mellow voice sang sweet old songs.

Sometimes she changed a timid, helpless word
With little girls at church; or rarer still,

Annie

An old-time visit gave for a whole half day
Some child for comrade.

Of the world beyond
The horizon she had fancies. It was bright,
Strange, and exciting like the stories told
In twilight by her father; never sad,
Nor lonely; full of romance and of dreams.
In the long lingering sunset I have seen
The steady eyes and wistful mouth appeal
One moment to the colors of the heavens
For answer, ere the dimple of her cheek
Was found by her father's lips, or the childish
voice
Sang to her doll a formal lullaby.

THE GRASSHOPPERS

DOWN by the orchard plot a man and boy,
The boy's hat just above the whitened
floor

Of oats half hiding the young trees and swaying
Under a strong breeze in the blazing noon.

The man looks upward, blinks with dazzled
eyes,

Then shading face with hand peers painfully;
Little winged creatures drive athwart the sun,
High up, in ceaseless, countless flight to the
north.

His mood runs hot envisioning the past.

"It was three years ago this very day.

"Three years ago that clinging, hopping horde
Made the earth crawl. With slobbery mouths,
All leafage, woody twig, and grain, and grass,
They utterly consumed, leaving the land
Abominable. The wind-borne plague rained
down

On the full-leaved tree where laughter rippled
light

The Grasshoppers

To answer odorous whispers of the flowers.
Soon, naked to the blistering sun, it stared
At the bones of its piteous comrades. After-
wards,
A jest to strangers—charity—cattle hunger-
ing—
Women and children starving! But the power
of the creatures!
The daughters of the locust, numberless, num-
berless!
Jaws bite, throats suck, the beauty of lovely
fields
Is in their guts, the world is but a mummy!"

Man and boy turn from the oats and the vigor-
ous orchard;
But as they go the lad is looking, looking
To see, high up, like gnats, the winged millions
Moving across the sun. May God rebuke
them!

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

I

IN morning breeze, the Indian summer's gold
Of sun on Mildred's cheeks aglow
Beneath dark hair; it glistens on the horse,
A glossy chestnut tossing his thick mane
In spirited canter, held straight on the path
Across the rolling prairie the four miles
To the little, low, log schoolhouse by the creek,
Two windows on the side, a home-made door,
Sod roof a trifle weedy, the rough ends
Of split ash rafters showing at the edge.
A shed, and ponies that will carry double—
Half of the children ride.

Within the house
Pine tables in four rows, benches to match,
Incipiently notched; a joyous map,
A painted blackboard; a high walnut desk
Brightened with flowers above the slender stem
Of a glass vase. Mid-room the mighty stove,
A swallower of enormous chunks of wood

The Schoolmistress

So that the fire may roar within the drum,
And all the stove's girth turn a glowing red
In challenge to the fury of winter wind.

This is but brisk October. The bell calls,
And the tanned children in coarse, home-made
clothes

Come clattering to stow head-gear on the hooks
Above the baskets, tiptoe to the seats,
Sing, hear the Bible, fall to study fast.
Jimmie's worn shoes must dangle in mid-air
As he prints with pride old news about the cat;
Here dark curls with red ribbons shake and
bob

As Susie struggles with her fraction sums;
Here Philip's mouth is grim as he tears apart
Some tough old sentence, settling word and
word

On the painful diagram. Here Johnnie sits
Enraptured with the animals and trees,
Cities and ships and wondrous waterfalls
Of the big geography, while up in front
A class drones heavily through Paul Revere.

The walls are chinked with plaster; overhead
Run tie-beam, purlin, ridge-pole, cleanly barked,
Supporting rafters overlaid by willows
Cut in green leaf, and now upholding sod.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Sometimes a mouse runs rustling; harmless
snakes

Come sliding to the floor, or up the logs
A dusky lizard darts.

'Tis here she moves,
The genius of the place, viewed as all wise
In booklore, honest, patient, loving, kind,
Courageous: all these talents for the sum
Of twenty-five a month and board herself.

II

Shall not life pay the man who catches dogs?
In his soul's garden, mildew. Does a tree
Not utter unconscious joy in the exquisite
Color and form and fragrance of its fruit?
There's natural joy in healthy human service,
Natural, not sacrificial. Monthly salary
Is token laborers are somehow worthy;
Useful, too, for books, beefsteak, and vaca-
tions.

For Mildred much of worth lay in the store
Her memory could treasure: the old room,
The children clustering, happiness in eye
And grace in movement; Willie's gentle lisp
Struggling with stubborn words; the lame boy's
look

Of speechless worship with a yellow rose;
The five-year-olds clinging about her skirts;
The half-grown girls with arms about her waist
Asking her to their homes; great awkward
boys,

Heady as bulls, the slaves of her every word,
Toiling prodigiously in Ray's Third Part

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Over cube root, and roaring at recess
In Prisoner's Base, or old-time games of ball.

If Mildred looked out when the sweeping rain
Blurred the gray prairie, limiting her sight
To scanty fields, did fancy mark far miles
With rose-lanes of romance, nor show the
 drudgers

In sweat and dust, or did she clearly sense
Workaday folk with private griefs at heart
And a tune on the lips in the field?

 If she had dreams
They colored and perfumed shrines not un-
 veiled
To vulgar gaze. The girl had been through
 college,
Traveled to California and New York;
For some seven months she rode a chestnut
 horse,
And was the teacher of this country school
At twenty-five a month and board herself.

THE RIVER ONCE MORE

SINCE yesterday under a stiff north wind
The slanting rain with intermittent hail
Had clinked against our windows. Now I
 peered

To where the black road split the dreary gray
Of the buffalo grass, and saw through the veil
 of rain,

On a dark horse a lad in a slicker lean
Into the storm. A white hat partly saved
His face from the pelting; one bare hand held
 firm

The reluctant horse at canter as with low head
It butted stormward. Came a burst of hail
And the horse whirled its back to stones that
 stung

Upon its cold, wet skin, and set its nose
To the ground, and shook its widely drooping
 ears.

“What is it, John?” my father asked, and I,
“Bill Turner riding Molly.”

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

“Ben, will you—”
My father spoke now to the hired man—
“Take a horse, ride and stop him? He must
stay
With us tonight. The ford will not be safe.
I left Gray saddled. Hurry!”

Ben reports
That when he reached the road he scarce could
see,
In the coming dusk and the veil of driving
rain,
The boy, already half of the short mile
To the ford. He galloped after, breathless,
sending
Against the gusts his hoarse halloos, but
lost
The lad in the rain-blurred, leafless trees that
masked
The river. Yet Gray shook from his eyes the
stinging
Drops, and lunged on with nose almost at
knee
Until the water, four feet of flood stage
Lapping the tree trunks, cut the roadway. Ben
Lashed his horse ahead for a clearer view
To where the rough stream struck his saddle
skirts,

The River Once More

Saw the brown current ruffled by the wind
Race in mid-channel, where strongly quartering
Old Molly's head outstretched was swimming
 brave,
And Bill showed head and shoulders. Then
 came hail
Like bullets, and the spurts of water rose
Blinding. When Molly reached the other
 side—
She hit the landing fair, Ben said, the bank
In other places is too steep and high,—
He saw the saddle was empty.

 We heard next day,
It was nearly dark when Molly, riderless,
Came trotting in at Turner's. Little Ruth
From her watch at the murky window, through
 the hail
Rushed breathless to the barn and breathless
 back
To her bedridden mother, and out once more
To the nearest neighbor's house a mile away.

Past midnight when they took him out at the
 dam
Seven miles below. There, in the lantern light,
One moment ere they carried him in, I saw

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Him lying on the cold wet grass with eyes
Wide open up to the beating rain.

You see,

Bill was my age, my playmate. What I felt—

It was last fall the county built the bridge.

TEN CENTS A BUSHEL

THE level sunrise brings a simple glory
To hoarfrost in November. Brilliance
soft

Lives in the buffalo grass of prairie spaces,
Lives in the gray of weathering tassel-top
On the dun rows of corn as in the field
The husker starts and stops his patient team.
Above the jangle of neckyoke, clatter of stalk
On rattling wagon, thud of the flung ear,
His voice is masterful.

With awkward vigor,
Over the rough and frozen ground he stumps,
Tearing the corn from heavy husks that rasp
Through glove and finger-cot to fray the flesh.
A rhythm rules the hands, the jerking arm,
No muscle wincing as the silk-fringed ears
Fly true, thump lightly on the towering board
Hour after hour. At noon the well-heaped
wagon

Creeps groaning to the stackyard. Steadily
The farmer bends and rises heaving weight

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Of yellow corn to roll from the shoulder-slope
Of an uncribbed mountain. The fields have
blessed the tiller,
And corn is king.

To market one day's drive,
To get ten cents a bushel. Sturdily up
And down the five bad hills; and wearily home
At dusk from the long, long miles; three trips
a week
Is all a team can stand.

Corn moulds and rots;
The kitchen fire is fed with yellow ears
Till the house reeks, and all the doors fly wide
To free the odor. Yet to market King,
To pay the notes and the three per cent a
month.

THREE PER CENT A MONTH

SOFT April sunshine sweetens all the world,
Yes, even the county town with smells of
spring;

And life is busy where the green blades shoot
Through last year's matted grasses, and crisp
leaves

At mid-forenoon light up the little maples
Set pioneering in the square's raw sod.

Across the three blocks of untidy streets,
Thirty low structures skirmish with their mates
In naked staring. At one windowed box
Some twelve feet square, team, wagon, driver
stand;

The farmer in gray jeans, form unrelaxed,
And face without a mask, trouble writ large.

The open door slowly emits a man
Knee-sprung, with hunching shoulders, wrinkly
neck,

And a beaked and bulbous face with narrowing
eyes,

To note for the mortgage Billy's three white
feet,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And Molly's star in forehead,—sixteen hands,
Weight over eleven-fifty,—and their ages,
Eight years and ten.

The farmer follows in;
Stands downcast, watching what a nervous
frown
Pursues the scratching pen on the chattel form.
Now speaks a throaty voice:

“At three per cent,
Four months, twelve dollars,—and leaves
eighty-eight.
And you'll have wheat to sell when the note is
due.”

In the sun the farmer straightens, mounts his
seat.
How listlessly the wagon rattles off
Through April sunshine and the smells of
spring.

MEANWHILE

THE August sun had still two hours of sky
When the white flag a-flutter from the
house
Signalled him to find his wife at watch
At the boy's bed. He laid a calloused hand
Lightly on that soft face now fever flushed.
"Much worse," she said.

"Yes, much worse. I'll ride Jeff
Cross-country, try to borrow a saddle horse
At Campbell's. If the doctor is at home—
Get there by one, tonight, and home again
In the morning, maybe eight, at most by nine."
His rough lips touched the boy who moaned
and stirred.

The sweating plough-horse changed from jolt-
ing trot
To clumsy gallop, soon was winded, fell
Back to a walk, gained breath and galloped on.
At Campbell's ranch few words. They learned
his need,
Saddled the pony, promised to relay
The doctor's team in the morning. It was ride.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

When sunset came the man was galloping
On gentle prairie. Soon he dropped from the
ridge,

Picking a way down canyon banks to follow
In the chill dusk of the draw a winding mile;
Then stiff ascent and upland track. The sky
Afar off held its tender sunset hues,
Slow fading. One by one the big white stars
Budded and blossomed. Sometimes prairie
owls

Gave chuckling notes and made dim fluttering.
The balm of cooling dews healed all the air,
And ripening grass was fragrant, and late
flowers,

While from the wheeling stars a gentle glow
Fell on the prairies like a luminous veil.
The vast plain's prayer was answered utterly.

As the dusk gathered in the little room
The woman still could see the pillow white,
And the child's tousled hair in outline dark
About his face. He broke from out his sleep
Babbling of strange wild fancies; hardly knew
At times, his name, her kindness. Lest the
dark

Loose more disorder in his wits, she brought
A lighted lamp and sang old ballad songs
In a soft voice that won him ease again,

Meanwhile

And quiet breathings. She could hear the clock
Lag noisily, and from the distant draws
The shrill wail of the coyote, and close by
The creaking misery of some cricket-thing.
Minutes seemed hours. She would try to read.
She got her Bible, but the tears came fast.
Try praying: surely there is help in prayer
That the boy should recover, that her man
Might find the doctor ready. She can see
As in a living vision the sunshine,
The doctor's rattling buggy racing up
In time.

In time? Thus praying, a slight noise
Led her eyes to the door. She saw it move,
Open, and a strange, dirty face looked in
Bristling with thickets of wild, brush-like beard.
How her heart beat! She did not rise nor
scream,
But with a finger at her lips, said, "Hush.
My boy is sick, out of his head, indeed,
And must not see you. It might make him die.
So leave us. Maybe you are hungry. Look
In the cupboard, you will find some bread and
meat,
And coffee on the stove. Go, wash and eat."
Came a low "Thank ye," and the door went
shut.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

She turned to where the clock hands pointed
ten.

There would be minutes while the tramp would
eat,—

This outcast fifty miles from the grading camps
Meant anything. She could not think nor
move,

A chill so numbed her, weakening every pulse.
But something somehow steadied all her tone
When the door opened once more, and the
voice

Asked, "Is there only you?"

"My husband's gone
For the doctor, and should be here even now.
Hush, the boy's waking. Go to the pump, and
bring
Cold water for the headcloths. Put the bucket
Upon the table. In the shed you will find
Fresh hay and blankets."

He was gone. Once more
The sweet voice crooning low the ballad tune
Without a tremble or any sign of fear
Mastered the boy's wild fancies, brought him
rest.

She listened to the clock, and hours went by;

Meanwhile

She looked out to the stars, and hours went
by;
At last a grayness, light grew, dawn
increased,—
In two more hours. At nine o'clock they came
In time and happily.

How like a tale,
Or a heart-breaking dream the afterwards!
But while death's presence from the noiseless
dark
Saturates all the air of some child's room
Where the mother prays for one more breath
unharméd—
Meanwhile—how measure her agony of fear?
How ease the watching of her wide-stretched
eyes?

THE CHURCH

I

THE blinding July sun at ten o'clock
Glares on the white walls of the little
church,—

The shingles silver-gray, the shutters green,
Sunflowers man-high in bloom against the
wall,—

And glares on dingy wagons trailed by dust,
Slow jolting to the platform at the door.

Women alight and enter, while the men
Tie sweating teams to the much gnawed hitch-
ing-posts.

How drowsily the horses stamp at flies!
The landscape wavers in the shimmering heat.

Come in from the strong sunlight. The pine
pews

Are filled with settlers. Men with grizzled
beards,

And faces weathered rough by sun and wind—
Wind that would wear down granite—listless
stand,

The Church

Awkwardly easing muscles now relaxed
Longer than is their use. The women move
Graceful and gracious, whether pale or tanned,
Thin, nervous, or in rosy health. Their eyes
Are bright, and bearing cheerful. Least at ease
Are growing girls and boys. Welcomes go
 round,
And gossips buzz until the organ wails
The slow, sad measures of the opening hymn.

II

Beside the open window, dreamily,
A sunflower pokes its stiff and oily head
Droned over by a hairy bumblebee.
An awkward boy sits gazing; does not hear
Or text or sermon; only sees the flower
Nod in the breeze, and finds the pew grow hard,
While muscles twitch and ache for liberty.

A little church; the settlers come for miles.
Some few, unhearing, sit in selfish dreams;
For life is vilely mingled, sweetly mixed,
Scanty or bounteous in vital force;
But here the most are really worshippers
Seeking in fellowship a sympathy
With God. Their simple faces plainly show
What feelings stir the heart, for hard looks
melt,

And thin, worn wretchedness in garb grotesque
Is eased of ugliness while it feeds
On love and hope. This meager hour may lift
Some grovelling face to see the blessed sky;
Master a soul, and yield it back to life
Tempered against the evil days to be.

A little thing, this church? Remove its roots,
Ossa on Pelion would not fill the pit.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

HAVE YOU AN EYE?

HAVE you an eye for the trails, the trails,
The old mark and the new?
What scurried here, what loitered there,
In the dust and in the dew?

Have you an eye for the beaten track,
The old hoof and the young?
Come name me the drivers of yesterday,
Sing me the songs they sung.

O, was it a schooner last went by,
And where will it ford the stream?
Where will it halt in the early dusk,
And where will the camp-fire gleam?

They used to take the shortest cut
The cattle trails had made;
Go down the hill by the easy slope
To the water and the shade.

But it's barbed wire fence, and section line,
And kill-horse-travel now;
Scoot you down the canyon bank,—
The old road's under plough.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Have you an eye for the laden wheel,
The worn tire or the new?
Or the sign of the prairie pony's hoof
Was never trimmed for shoe?

O little by-path and big highway,—
Alas, your lives are done!
The freighter's track is a weed-grown ditch
Points to the setting sun.

The marks are faint and rain will fall,
The lore is hard to learn.
O heart, what ghosts would follow the road
If the old years might return.

THE RIDGE FARM

THE ridge is open to all moody weather:
The bruising of the blizzard leave it
numb;

From the scorched south the waves swim over,
over,

Tireless; late afterglow brings stars and dews
Like motherly caresses; and black clouds
Deep bellowing lash its face with gusty rain.

From the crest Allen's soddy won a view
Of wide slopes rich with grasses brown and
gray,

And scattered little fields, and far-spaced
groups

Of mud-brown dots that mark a fellow farm,—
Two miles the nearest. Yet on calm days,
smoke,

From some deep wrinkle rising, promised plain
A nearer neighbor.

Two rooms, Allen's house.
Yellow clay hillocked the convenient cave;

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Round the sod stable crouched the cribs and
stacks
Girt with a barbed wire fence, and over all
Stood sentinel the windmill.

Allen's wife
Found loneliness the lord of this great plain:
Impalpable, a spirit serpent wise;
Thin shadows in the daylight; in the dark
A misty lurker marching over the ridge
From his wild canyon fastness. He rules
thought,
Bids the ear listen, the eye watch and weary,
While the strained nerve pleads that it is not
eased
By the querulous sighs, nor by that whistling
drone
Like to the far-off wail of long-lost souls
Rolled dull and thin, the voices of the wind
Waving the green grass, waving still the gray.
Her life was blunt with sameness: house and
hens
And garden and the wind's voice. Few and
prized,
The trips to town, to church, the visit changed,
Grew to misfit proportions. Was she frayed?
Not with the toil. Her body was depressed

The Ridge Farm

By what wore down her mind. The livelong
day,

Except at meal time, was her husband gone
About his labors. At the first she sang
To dull her mood, but this grew rare and rare;
Her voice forewent its tune, she scarcely
hummed;

Her set eyes found in fixed melancholy
The lingering patches of the snow in March
And the autumnal drifts of goldenrod
Dappling the prairie, while from listless hands
Her sewing fell, and in the silences
A cricket's chirping shook with pain the nerves
That had been fearless. Then she longed to be
Where children's prattle once might ease her
ears

And children's faces feed her hungry eyes.

Her husband noted how the songs were stilled;
Was troubled over the unvarying gaze,
The lines about the mouth, and the head poised
Like one whose body lifts a grievous weight,
Yet may not ease its burden. The last year
His counsel that she visit her old home
The winter through while work was slack had
been

Denied for his sake. Now the care for health,
Urged firmly, won assent. Assent once made,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

She brightened visibly, thought to recall
Her word of going. Allen would not hear.
He knew how stark a spell the prairie wrought
In league with loneliness quite to disrank
Wits, fancies, memory.

His final word
At the station, "Bring some cousin back with
you,
Kidnap an aunt or grandmother. Good-bye."

It was late February with the sun
Glinting from the fresh snow when Allen stood
Again at the frowsy little station. All
The futile uglinesses of the place
Wore shining beauty.

When the noisy wheels
Ceased grinding, Mollie led down by the hand
A rosy boy of seven, diffident
To Allen's hearty welcome. Very soon
The farmer's wagon lumbered out of town
With easy joltings while the drowsy lad
On straw and comforts gathered childish
dreams.
Then Mollie filled in the particulars
Her letters had but sketched. To her home
town

The Ridge Farm

Came boys and girls some fifty in a group,
Orphans from New York City. Those in
charge

Granted them only unto chosen folk
On surety of good home and loving care.
And little Robert's father and mother, both
Fine people, had been dead for two whole
years.

Then he lived with an aunt, and she was dead,
Scarcely five months. There was no property.
So the home-finders took him in their charge.

"He reads and writes, and ciphers cleverly.

Plenty of spirit, mischief too, and fun.

He wakes at morning with a charming smile,
And when he puts his arms about your neck,
And warms you in the laughter of his eyes,
You can't refuse his askings. Lively? Yes.
A healthy growing boy, and only once
Found crying over memories."

Spring waxed glad,
And summer's bounteous promises increased.
The house was full of singing, gay with notes
Of childish laughter. Now the little lad
Knew which end first a cow or horse would rise;
Had watched their noisy browsings while the
dew

Glinted so rich under the level sun;

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Had given a name to every colt and calf
As it moved staggering on awkward legs
With eyes too young for wonder. He could
ride
The big, mouse-colored mare, shrug as she
might;
Could hold the lines; now chasing in the field
The chittering ground-squirrel, now in the
shade
Of the house gable busy with mud pies,
Or stick and knife and string and board and
nail.
For him life held surprises: he had come
Into a wondrous land, and every day
Gladdened with gazings.

Loneliness, the lurker,
Impalpable, untiring, serpent wise,
Scared by the rippling of a childish laugh
Skulks into canyon fastnesses, and scouts
For easier victims. He has lost the ridge.

IN THE CANYON

THIS is her diary. Come with me to view
The canyon; think you see it as of old
When Martha lived, and hear the simple tale.

Down the steep, rough slope for a hundred
yards,

The stiff, brown bunch-grass swishing round
our knees,

Until the shelving bank abruptly falls

To the canyon floor divided by a ditch

Under the brush of ironweed, flowering currant,

And clumps of dwarf wild-cherry with black
fruit

Thick clustering among the leathery leaves.

The uneven canyon jogging right and left,

Brown slopes to east, and west, and north, and
south,

Forms a deep cup; one notch to the southeast

Reveals, miles off, the buildings of a farm.

Such view and skyline for the sodded mound

Pierced by the rusting stovepipe. The roof's
front

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Overbrows a window and an ample passage
Cut smooth in the clay and cleanly swept.

Noon-hour.

In the open door against the inner dusk
Stands Martha gazing; her blue sunbonnet
Is pressed back, and reveals coarse, graying
hair

Over a face dealt harshly with by sun
And wind. She looks right down the canyon
bed

Past rope-and-pulley well, chokecherry patch,
Beyond the bean poles, and the withered vines,
And yellowing sweet corn, to the stretch of the
slope,

The notch and the buildings.

With long weary moods
This childless widow faced the lonesome months
Here in the canyon, for the nearest soddy
Lay out of sight fully a mile away.
She said once to this neighbor, shyness melting
Under kindly eyes: "You say it's half a visit
To see folk pass on the road. You touch their
lives.

The who, and when, and why, fill up your heart
With friendly thoughts and hopes. I chose a
spot

In the Canyon

In which the dugout could be cheaply made.
My well is shallower by a hundred feet
Than any on the ridge, and easily works
With rope and pulley. I don't mind coarse
clothes,
Nor gardening with the hoe, nor guarding
fowls
Against hawk, coyote,—but to be alone!
If I could see your house, and you watch mine!"
She paused with a sigh, her parted lips grew
firm.

"It's only four more years."

Some weeks had passed,
She came again, resumed the thread abruptly
In some such words as these:

"My dugout room
Is very lonesome. Let your child come stay
The night with me. I long to hear a voice,
On trifling human matters. I make pets
Of the fowls, hold foolish talk with my dozy
horse,
Have named the seven jackrabbits that play
On the slope in front. Beasts have no words
to give
In answer, and tasks fail that filled the time.
The curious quilt is finished; there remain
No scraps for working."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Now the child has come,
Tossing her soft brown curls from eager eyes,
To stand by Martha folded in her arm.
The mother made assent.

Folk seldom thought
Of Martha's struggle, for she did not give
Her burdens unto others. She took charge
Of her course, and moved with delicate steps
to meet
At the surprising turns of the stony path
The unpitying spies of fate. And while she
groped
In silence on, lone hour and hour might sap
The health of body and soul. The neighbors
saw
Her hands hang listless, and her shoulders sag,
The tan forsake her cheek, languor eat through
The strength from every muscle. Like a vine
Struck at the root by beetles, she drooped fast.
Good gossips sensed her weakness, visited,
Brought delicacies, gave companionship;
Saw her eye lose the strange bewildered lights,
And that she breathed more free from shudder-
ing dreams
Waking her in the midnight's stifling black;
And that she ceased from muttering to herself.

In the Canyon

One woman urged, "Come, Martha, stay with
us
A week, a month!"

"Thank you, I cannot come.
I should be in your way,—my fowls, my horse!
Besides,—"

"Why, sell your chickens, bring the horse!
I worry when I think of you alone.
Suppose,—of course, it's no affair of mine.
You must get strength."

"Indeed, you are most kind!
Thank you, I cannot come. I'll manage here."
No querulous note from the quiet voice; the
head
Held a rebellious poise. Now visits ceased
Because work drove the neighbor women hard.

On Martha's loneliness the dreams returned,
Flooded her mind, and overwashed and
drowned
All its defences. This the diary tells,
Not all coherently. Its simple words
Say much, suggest to understanding folk
The height and weight of woe. Its leaves
were found

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

When the nearest neighbor woman taking
thought
How Martha was not seen this fortnight space
Let drop her tasks, half ran to the canyon
slope,
And breathless down. Loose tumbleweeds
confused
The passageway to the door. She knocked;
she called;
She knew the secret trick to lift the bar,
Opened and peered. Disorder everywhere.
The farthest corner showed a barricade
Of washstand, chair, and woodbox. Behind
this,
Crumpled uneasily upon the floor,
The woman lay. Profusion of gray hair
Half hid the terror wrinkled in her face
And a-stare in her wide blue eyes.—

This diary
Is intimate and not for careless gaze.
Its first page the first Sunday on her claim.
Much reminiscence in the early leaves.
Married two years, her husband died. She
tells
Her fear of snakes, and how a flood in the
ditch
Heaps weed-drift on the bushes.

In the Canyon

Here she writes:

"Gray clouds, cold rain. Whatever light
comes through
My one small window soaks into dirt walls,
Leaving me in a shivering dusk."

"The men

Plastered my walls with native lime—rough
coat,
Dull gray. I tacked white muslin all above
To the rafters; it keeps dirt from sifting down,
And it makes the dugout lighter. I'll not
choke
On rainy days with darkness."

Farther on—

"Six months today. The snow was dazzling
white,
And the sun gave a blindness. The horse
drank
A single bucket and shivered with the cold.
I got three eggs; two leghorns froze their
combs.
Warmer tonight. My monthly trip to town
Tomorrow if it's fine. To Ashby's place
By sunrise,—there get warm, and leave my
horse.
Less chilly in his wagon. Home by dark,—

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Or moonlight,—lantern ready. I dread the
cold—

Long to see people. I'll borrow on the hill
The county paper, bring the feeble stuff,
The idle precinct locals and bought praise
Of patent curealls home to read. Thin food,—
It sours on the mind. I hate and fear this
place;

Such stillness lies upon it all day long!
And with the dusk, day's quiet has increased,
The little lamp calls all the shadows up
From stove, chair, table, woodbox, vivifies
The lines in the checked curtain where the
shelves

Sag with the dishes. I move to the door,—"
One can imagine how she wrote this page,
The bent thin shoulders, and the firm sweet
mouth,

Stillness,—the lingering whisper of her pen
With the shadows listening,—

"I move to the door.
Such moonlight on the snow, shadows and
stars!

Out here the stars are always near at hand.
The air is stirless, fearing the least noise.
I wonder that my heart can beat so loud,
I long to free my senses with a shriek.

In the Canyon

What if—? Oh! Oh! the coyote's cry,
That wildly shrilling ululation bursts
Shattering the nerves. And now his eager
 mates
Multiply wailing answers from the slope.
The cries die off.—Tomorrow to the town."

"Midsummer's hand is heavy. Heat and light
And wind that never ceases. If my life
Were like a man's I might go striding free
To fresh adventures, hardying my soul,
Choosing my ground of vantage. When I
 came,
This was adventure; it is penance now.
Days die in turn. But I have set my steps
To this path, and I keep it, spite of sun,
And wind, and dust, and thirst, or beasts that
 growl,
Or brutes that bristle.

 "O, to be away!
Lake water, trees, the wood-thrush! In four
 years."

"My cherry patch is white with spires of bloom,
I smell the piquant sweetness. April sun
Makes my fowls noisy. Tiny bands of green
Cross the black garden, and I should be glad,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

But loneliness is heavy. Just five years
Last night since the fire. Shall I have again
Books, music, place in life? O tale of days,
Pinching and scraping, buried in this hole!
I write no letters. They reveal my mind
Drugged by this solitude, beaten too low,
Quiescent, not rebellious save in nerves
Acutely sensitive, bidding me hide
From pity. All alone, yes, all alone!
Three years, three months yet. I say to myself
At morn, seven hours till noon, then seven
more,
Night; two more hours, and then to bed
In hope of sleep. Shall I dawdle, spin work
out?
Then sit to wear the dragging day quite
through,
Counting my breathings seven thousand times?
This diary helps. That's why I write so much,
And give it pains for the most part."

As we turn
Through many a leaf, the neat and even form
Of the word begins to waver.

"I have laughed!
The little girl who stayed with me last night
Was full of talk and glee. My dugout room
Had never heard such merriment,—and I,—

In the Canyon

He called my laughter silvery—long ago,
As in another world.—How good to laugh!"

"Why not give up? I lack the power to choose
Another project. Oh, for some strong will
To establish me. I have read my one book
over

Story by story, promise after promise.
I need help now. If God is in this world,
He has forgot the corner where I lie,
And no one cares. And yet, the clouds, the
stars!"

"Better to write than mutter to myself:
The page bears moody words my tongue might
bring
Into the open; and when tears would flow,
Or terror crush, I clutch the pen and write."

"Yes, I can love my neighbors. They have
been
Loving to me. And when my health returns
I will throw off timidity, reserve,
Try mixing with their gayety."

"A road
Bears witness men have passed, makes promises
That men will come. If I lived by a road,—"

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"The heat of August burns the bunch-grass
brown;

It makes my body fail. I hadn't breath
To climb the canyon slope, and found no taste
For my own cooking. Early then to bed.
Through all the shimmering quiet of the dusk
I lay in utter loneliness. The wind
Went on in long-drawn sighs. At last a doze,
Then dreams, the mind indulging fancy's whim
And terror's utmost threatening. Habit this.
My senses need relief. I wake, and watch
Through my window the dark sky soak up the
light

Of coming day, deep blue, then silver blue,
Then all day's splendor. Opening the door,
I look on the chaste grasses, see the dew
In shine and shadow, feel the morning breeze
Tighten my nerves, and win a kind of strength.
Yet not such force as when from healthful sleep
And quiet dreams of friends, the body wakes
Purified as by music's happiest streams
From all the dregs of yesterday.

"I write

In this high mood one moment. How days
wear!

Nights wear, months wear! I never can grow
used

In the Canyon

To loneliness. This canyon seems a trap
Closing me in. The weight of pent-up moods
Must find some floodway of escape or burst
Explosively the barriers. Sunset time
Brings causeless tears, and while the brief dusk
glooms,
I shake with sobbings. When my heart is
hushed,
Sleep holds aloof. I mutter to myself,
'Two years more, and ten months, eleven
days.' "

"I hear the migrant plover whistling high.
Five hawks wheel screaming down the dirty
wind.
Had I but wings—"

The other lines are blank.
A little further on three leaves are gone.
The final page is crumpled, slightly torn,
Shows haltings, fresh departures; words begin
Precisely, snarl themselves.

"The door still holds.
They have besieged me two days and two
nights.
Water,—I fear to go—the ditch—the well—
The cherry patch.—In the shed the biggest one
Got in the horse. I chopped him. Night—

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Six more—tap window—beat the stovepipe—
Will break in—One said—if—open the
door—

I could go home, and—. No escape,—afraid!
Four nights awake. If I were but a child
Sleeping in mother's arms! Oh hush! I
hear—

God in heaven, how they howl and yell. Lord
God,
Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help!
Why won't you help?"

.
The wilderness shall blossom as the rose.
Its grasses cover graves, its canyons bury
In deep forgetfulness.

Down the steep slope
With the brown bunch-grass swishing round
your knees.

The rusty stovepipe rises through a beard
Of starveling herbage. A mat of tumbleweeds
In the doorway is o'erhung with bluestem
blades;

They blot the path to the well. The garden
place

Bristles with ragweed; at one corner spire
Red and white hollyhocks, and the dying souls
Of damask roses drench the sultry noon.

ROAD AND PATH

O, ROAD and path, and path and road,
They write the story plain;
To the picnic grounds, to the little church,
And for water, wood, and grain.

They point to the friend, and the dearest
friend,
The gossip, the recluse;
To the cloud of grief, and the star of love,
And all life's human use.

There's a rain-washed mark leads up the hill
Because two boys were chums;
And a bridle path steals down the draw,—
Romance in its season comes.

O, fennel and chickweed fill the ruts
In the sunny buffalo grass;
For Andy Marsh and his cousin Bill
Look sidewise when they pass.

'Twas a well-worn track to Heathering's farm,
But the courting's over now;

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Mary and Belle chose husbands well,
And Jane the veil and the vow.

To Connor's house is a welcome road,
And jollity is ringing;
O, the open door and the dancing-floor,
The laughter and the singing!

There are highways born, the old roads die,—
Can you read what once they said?
From the rain-worn ditch, and the sunflower
clump,
And the needs of folk long dead?

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

SPRING, spring once more! The meadow-
lark gave note

About his grassy nest, and builders hummed
Old songs while sod on sod their houses rose.
Through widening strips of field all rusty-black,
The first fine blades of corn sprang laugh-
ingly,—

And men had joy of neighbors. Fellowship
Budded and blossomed into a schoolhouse-
church

Just where the Carico swings a wooded arm
Across wide meadows to the upland slope.
Twenty-five settlers brought their families
And built as brothers build. Log after log,
Strong hand to hand was helpful. Last, a feast
Summoned the hearty workers.

All roads meet

At the schoolhouse-church; it gives to Fairview
Ridge

A rallying sign, a name, a bond. Upgrows,
Enveloping this jangling human group,
The personality of neighborhood.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Who and whence were the neighbors? Illinois
Sent grimy miners from the smothering pits
To steep themselves in sunshine; and thin
clerks
Came from great cities, asking health and
strength
From the open prairie; renters from New York
And Pennsylvania; the Georgia cracker;
Old-soldier farmers out of Iowa;
Hoe-wielders from the Indiana clay;
A sunburnt plainsman who had fought the
tribes;
Lumberjacks from the camps in Michigan;
Soft-voiced plantation-lords—aristocrats
Unbowed by loss of slaves; hill-billy fiddlers
Full of the music of the mountain brooks;
A gold-seeker who dropped the battered
sledge;
A faro dealer with long curly hair
And soft and guileless eye; gray schoolteachers;
Carpenters out of cities in the East;
Broken-down cowboys singing of the range;
A widower dentist, spoken of as "Doc",
And called about to heal the countryside;
A bankrupt grocer; men from over sea,
Danes, Germans, Swedes, and Irish, marrying
wit
To words misfashioned.

The Neighborhood

As a group, these men
Scarce matched in vigor and resource the first
Old pioneers who set adventurous feet
In lonely wildernesses. Straggled in
The empty-handed, weary with long years
Of gainless toil; and the land-hungry came
Like thirsty cattle to the shadowy pools.
On hand and knee, young strength and old
good-will
Combed through the matted grass for corner
stones;
And many a bold-heart brought his family,
Their faces brightening like prairie flowers,
To own a home.

Once more the world was new.
It sunned itself in kindness and good will:
Old women's gossip, chats by road and door;
Singings and frolics; weddings, funerals;
While love strode in to lighten evil days,
And souls grew large with human sympathy.
If eyes in solitary jealousies
Burned, or men in their natural desires
Should buzz like hornets to the tune of spite,
Sad neighbors they.

A good world in the main.
Jack borrowed here a horse or lent a plough;
Saw pipes relighted while his summery mood

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Tongued his life story into friendly ears.
Bess heard loud hoofbeats in the deepening
dusk
Bearing an eager lover, or she saw
The hushed room, the white-aproned woman,
all
A mother's generosity of love
Answering six months' acquaintance.

A new world!
Once more began for worthy and unfit
The shaking of the sieve that sorts to size.
Men held up heads to a society
Expectant of backbone. Who won the place
Of underling had just himself to thank,
Blame as he might his neighbors and his wife.
Chance could not keep men equal; it could give
More strength to all,—yet unto him that
hath—.

.
Spring on the land, and meadow-larks a-singing!
On Fairview Ridge, the joy of human neighbors,—
And boys and girls with wonderful May
weather
In brave young hearts! Spring on the blossom-
ing land!

THE BANDED

WHO are the banded? Gather from the
four

Broad winds one hundred strangers varying
In tongue, age, disposition; set them down
On the wild prairie where a neighbor's help
Is priceless. Each has left an ordered world
Where every wheel rolls on in its old rut
To the expected stopping place, and men
Make law of local patterns, local custom.
How shall these hundred settlers find adjustment

To their unsettled neighbors, and to thoughts
Novel and startling, thoughts which fostering
years

May nourish to strange fruitage? A problem
Too large for human powers, infinite
In nice complexities.

The spirit of life
Will draw this dusk confusion into form,
Will shape the self of the neighborhood
wherein,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Like wheat straws in the bundle, men are
bound,
And press upon each other, bringing help
Or harm not to be measured. Hate, and love,
And hateful love, and loving hate, and low
Passions that bind man to his brother beast,
And wild sweet hopes, and airy fancies lifted
Like a winged song half way from man to God,
Must merge into the spirit of the group
Which pipes for dancers, mourns to those that
mourn,
Trains one wolfhound to charge the bristling
pack,
Pampers another into poodle form,
And for a sulky brute lays a rod in brine.

Brutes may object to rods. Suppose the cur
When threatened, snarls, when beaten, howls
and bites;
Dogs, children, wives, and neighbors swell the
clamor,—
Bow-wow and boo-hoo, Fairview Ridge erup-
tive.

It's easier to start than end a fracas,
And *status quo* may seem beyond the reach
Of thought itself, demanding that each bristle

The Banded

Shall lie sleek on the dog, and not a tremor
Stir in the extinct volcano.

Here the banded
Fashion the fate of man. Who prays for
blessing
Shall ask for health, a clean soul, and good
neighbors.

NATHAN BRIGGS

THROUGH two small windows sunshine
 slanted in
To die upon the splintery schoolroom floor,
While the October gusts whipped dirt and
 weeds
Against the rough-hewn logs, or through loose
 chinks
Sang, keying children's nerves to concert pitch.

At eleven fell a loud vehement fit
Of knocking at the door. Little Ernest
 plumped
Out of his seat, fell flat, and the children stared
While the teacher turned the knob. There
 stood Nate Briggs
With face well smeared with dust, a bloody
 nose,
Torn overalls, a cudgel in his hand,
And eyes on fire with fury, and to her
"Good morning, Mr. Briggs," showed teeth
 and barked,

Nathan Briggs

"You whipped my little Willie yesterday,
Because that cussed Jones girl pulled his hair.
God damn the Joneses! By the holy golden"—
 swift,
The door went shut in his face and the key was
 turned.

At noon the teacher wrote, and Arthur Flynn
Galloped to the road and waited for the stage.
In three days came the upshot. Nathan Briggs
Sailed gloriously past the country store,—
Top buggy, driver with a spanking team,—
To trudge back, two days later, coat on arm,
Afoot, the thirty dusty miles from town.

A thrasher's outfit close beside the road
Had halted work to mend the driving belt.
Began the grinning:

 "H'lo Nate, where you been?"

"Sold your horse and buggy? Didn't like to
 ride?"

"You ought to have made the sheriff fetch you
 back."

"What's the fine for cussin' schoolma'ams?"

 "Old man Jones

Says he wants to lick you agin; says he'd be glad
To pay once more for his cattle in your corn

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

For the pleasure of fightin'." "Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!

We ain't no schoolma'ams. You can't frighten
us

By shakin' your fist and cursin'."

Nathan Briggs

Like a footsore dog toiled home. And glance,
and gibe,

And grins like lashes fell where the bruising
ached.

How to set right his world out-puzzled him.

Apologize, atone? Such acts require

Romantic fineness, power to undertake,

And will that stoops with a shoulder-load of
blame

Along the public road on a holiday.

It was his wish that people should forget.

In spite of curse and clod, humiliations

Dogged every step to make him hide his head.

If his slow thoughts fermenting bitterly

Did not burst out, some fostering spirit saved
him.

He set no foot off his farm for the next six
months;

Indeed, he thought of moving farther west.

But folk need neighbors, time cures every woe,

So this fault found oblivion. Once a year,

Nathan Briggs

Perhaps, some store-box winker may refer
To the stylish buggy-ride of Nathan Briggs.

His young son had to bear the father's crimes
At school, poor tearful champion of a love
Already gibbeted. The teacher's care
Guarded him when it might. And Mrs. Briggs
Who had a reputation for currant jell
Sent her a dozen glasses of the best.

MISTER DWIGGINS

BILL DWIGGINS had been Billy thirty
years,
A boyish name which piqued his clever wife,
As if her man were ticketed light-weight
Out here as in Ohio. He had land,
A team, and stock. Let him be Mister now,
Take office as assessor, constable,
Or school director, and by slow degrees
Grow into larger duties. It may be
She had excuse, had suffered in old days
The patronage of those whose men had hired
Good-natured, easy Billy.

Mister Dwiggins
Was huge, flat-bodied, moved with the swinging
gait
Of a slow, steady ox. I've seen him toil
At knotty problems, tilted in his chair,
In strained attention drawing on his pipe,—
Bristly mustache, arched brows, uplifted eye.
Now blessed be good counsel!

Mister Dwiggin

His wife helped.
The slight, shawled figure with the sunny face
Found welcome at the Ashbys; lively chat
The Browers held with her; and she talked
around

With Butterpaugh, Embree, and Himmelblau,
Casey, Flynn, Boyd, O'Reilley, McIntyre,
Oltrogge, Davis, Matzybon, and Trinque,
Fox, Martin, Marsh, King, Anderegg and
more,

They should uphold the interest of the Ridge
By starting a literary.

Pettigrew

Helped by objecting. Four or five gave ear
To his hoarse voice on mail-day as he sat
On the puncheon bench outside, with big hat
slouching

To drooping shoulders. Thin, unsmiling lips
Moved in that bony face, as steeped in sourness
As if his soul were lined with colic-cramp.

"Worthless performance—crude! Hoary de-
bate

On *Fire and Water*. Let the children speak
At Christmas, Decoration, last of school.
Paper bound to be bad; learns younger folk
To disrespect their elders. And remember,
'For every idle word—in that last day'."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Casey was holding match to his dudeen,
Delaying answer; from the inner room
A woman's tones: "I'm glad you told me,
Janet,
How to make that melon pickle; Mister
Dwiggins
Has praised it over and over." Then, in the
door,
Black lisle gloves found adjustment, and a
smile
Sentenced the culprit:

"Oh, there will be faults—
Our faults which make us humble. But I like
To work with those who put their whole hearts
in,—
And the spirit of the neighborhood, communion
In sympathy, and in laughter—"

"Vanity, woman!
Folly and sin increase, while we pursue
Idle frivolity."

"Come and make that speech
At the literary! 'Thoughts, shut up, want air,
And spoil like bales unopened to the sun.'"

"Let the women keep a silence in the
churches!"

Mister Dwiggins

"Nor laugh with one another. I pity his
wife,—
Married to such a bully! But we'll sing
Together, Janet, nor mind if pessimists
Wear scratchy woolens."

Deep, unbroken silence;
Dazed by the indelicate word, Jim Pettigrew
Kept glum eyes on the ground. His auditors
Moved chuckling forth with gossip for their
wives.

Standing room only, that November night;
The aisles were full, the windows. Cheering
rocked
The schoolhouse when Bill Dwiggins, flushed
with pride,
As president-elect ended his speech,—
There are who hint a woman wrote it for
him,—
And introduced the dentist to orate
On Aaron Burr. The genial worthy
stepped
Square to mid-platform, gestured right and
left—
A college medal glittering on his coat—
Boomed in brave language:

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

“Lo, the beauteous
Aurora had risen in the majestic east,
And shed long garnet beams across the surface
Of the waters rippling in the morning breeze
Like a sea of broken mirrors, and reflecting
The shattered scintillations. Hudson’s cliffs
With violets were sprinkled.” Fifteen minutes
Of artificial flowers. His applause
Was nigh an uproar.

Now two sisters sang;
Their voices overflowed the little room,
The bell-like alto lifting hopeless grief
Till many eyes had tears. Next, children spoke
Breitmann and Carleton ballads.

A recess.
Young lads rushed out for moonlit pullaway;
The organ drew the singers: *Vacant Chair*,
The Little Old Sod Shanty, *Billy Boy*,
Tenting Tonight, *Sweet Afton*, *Rosy Nell*,
And *Rocking on the Billows* had their turns;
Then business meeting.

Truly, a success,
This literary! Mister Dwiggins won
The place of constable two successive years.
Next fall he will be sheriff if he minds
The counsel of Mrs. Dwiggins,—so men say;
They call him Billy yet, but change the tone.

THE CLAIM-JUMPER

I

AT HER DUGOUT

BECAUSE it's cut in the canyon bank, you
looked
For a rabbit hole with a window and a door?
Come in; the supper's on the stove. You
see
Rag carpet, bright cretonne for the shelves.
The lounge
And the table once were boxes. In September
Goldenrod is my favorite, and I've filled
Both vases. I shall have a handsome soddy
After I prove up and pay off my debts;
Saving is slow for schoolma'ams.

You will pardon
My going on to spread the cloth, I know,
For you'll be hungry. Oh, that mound of sod
Off yonder on the hill? That used to be
The house that Jarvis built to jump my claim

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

While I was teaching on the Frenchman Fork,
Forty miles off. The neighbors tore it down.
I didn't know! So terrible a chance
For death or cripplings! People feared him,
too.

Maybe in part his looks. He stooped by habit,
As tall men stoop in following the plough.

From his sloping shoulders hung great length
of arms

Ending in knobby fingers. His Adam's apple
Made an elbow joint in trying to lift straight
His shaggy, rough-hewn head. Wide flaring
ears,

Under the slouch of a big white hat, and eyes
Rounder than common, hard bright blue, like
marbles,—

Set, starey eyes. Maybe that's what scared
people,

Or just that he was a jumper. Someone came
At night and shot three bullets through the
stovepipe

On my roof. Yes, I was here.—The biscuit
need

Another minute, and the baked potatoes
Are done. I like the smell.—May have been
Jarvis,

As they said, or maybe not. With a needlegun

The Claim-Jumper

He could pick an egg from a post at a hundred yards.

The law? I was at law. Law isn't everything. Too much set rules, delays, and costs, and fees.

You see, I had a right to earn my living.
I had to! I wish the government official
Who says continuous residence just means,
'Sleep on your claim once every thirty days
Or lose your right,—' I wish he had to teach
Forty miles from his dugout all the winter,
Drive all day Saturday up and down canyons
So steep the buckboard's all the team can
manage,—

And walking safer,—and in the drifts, or the
wind

On the open prairie,—spend one night in the
dugout,

And Sunday driving back. This year my
schoolhouse

Is only six miles off, and there's no Jarvis.

I'll tell you all about him after supper.

How do you have your tea? One lump, or
two?

I like them crisp and brown and piping hot.
My cousin sent this tea from New York City.

II

THE JUMPER

It was in brisk October afterglow
When Mrs. Kinsey bringing in the wood
Heard a rattling wagon pass on to the draw;
Its clatter increased, ended in a thud,—
Silence—then muffled calls. She rushed to the
road.

At the bottom of the slope a wagon box
Lay upside down, cries came from underneath.
The team, still fastened to the running gears,
Stood quiet.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, not much hurt.

Lift off the box!”

“And you, who may you be?”

“I’m Jarvis. Help me out!”

Mrs. Kinsey paused.

“No, Mr. Jarvis, you have jailed yourself.
I leave you. When my husband comes, he may
Help you if he likes.”

The Claim-Jumper

"But woman, O my God!"

"I help no thief to steal a woman's claim!"

"By law—help me, my shoulder hurts."

"The law!

And her in debt establishing her rights!
Anyway, I can't lift it." She paid no heed
To his shouts while she unhooked and tied his
team.

The first sort moonlight mellowed all the draw
When farmer Kinsey tilted the big box,
And Jarvis crawled out. Silently the two
Set all to rights. If Jarvis's left arm
Was painful, he could use it as he pushed
The singletree with his leg, and hooked the
tugs.

Kinsey's slow voice was vibrant. "Better stay
here,
Tonight."

"Thank you, I can't. My pigs and cow
Need food and water."

"Well, you better stay.
Yes, true, my wife won't have you in the house.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

But you can sleep in the shed. Wait, listen to
me!
Stay here!"

"You think there's danger at my place."
The shoulders lifted, and the wide mouth gave
Tones harsh and rigorous as granite stone.
"I've had their threats. Some will go home in
boxes.
I won't be scared nor bullied, not by fifty."

"Jarvis, I think you know that if you shoot,
The boys will make a sieve of you. Otherwise,
They'll have a frolic with feathers and rail.
I'm not your friend; perhaps I run a risk.
But you can sleep in the hay."

"One minute, Kinsey!
As to the lie that says I went at night
Shooting at that girl's dugout,—I'm no such
fool.
If I could find who did it I would make him
Eat the dirt of the stable. First I knew
Was when the store refused me credit. The
neighborhood
Is ready to mob me, and I've got to kill
Or be killed, and it's God damn tough on me!"

The Claim-Jumper

He spoke from the wagon, and his eyes were
fixed
Where the rough track climbed the steep bank
ahead.

The horses trotted. Jarvis let his thought
Move with the wagon's rattling tune. Such a
group
Would not be ready to start till after ten,
Or maybe midnight. Everyone in it, of course.
Claim jumpers have no friends. These men
would find
His rifle held sixteen bullets. He would be
glad
At last to have it out. For all these months
He had stood them off. And yet, what end,
what end?
He looked about. Perhaps his last of nights.
A gentle breeze, such moonlight, and the stars
Pouring soft splendor. All the prairie rolled
As in enchanted beauty. Why remain
To see the harshness, ugliness, the day
Must soon bring back for him? The children
hid
If he passed on the road. Men would not
speak;
And women would not speak but only look.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

His hide was not so tough but he could feel,—
This Kinsey woman, now!—

Well, when he came,
The claims were taken, and no good land left
Unless by jumping. Once you jumped, you
must
Go on to win, to justify yourself
In the teeth of all who fight you.

A way out?
Was it like his father's garden? Crabgrass
grew;
His father only cursed, and next year's plant-
ing
Was choked the sooner with the help of sand-
burs.
Lay hand to the roots! The worst is not the
fighting;
But standing alone, with no one to give help,
To laugh with you, to think in sympathy,
More than with a steer goaded on to a cattle
car.
Life is too short. Unless there's more in the
world
Than law and guns—. Is there no happier
spot

The Claim-Jumper

With friends, and neighbors, and companion-
ship,
And laughter, and a home? His horses love
him,
Will follow with dumb nosings; and tonight
It seems the prairie loves him while the moon
Touching its beauty tenderly,—

Bosh! The fall
Had jolted worse than he thought, for his
shoulder ached.

The pigs reproached him as he reached the
yard;

The cow called softly. Once their wants
relieved

He threw in the wagon some small movables,
And drove off the back way and down the draw.

III

JARVIS WAITED

The moon was down when a knock at Kinsey's door

Brought the wakeful man of the house. "Come in! Come in!

What has happened? Are you hurt?"

"O no, not hurt.

I'm going away—must leave my cow and pigs;
And farming tools and junk about the place.

Will you look after it? I'll give ten per cent
Of what they sell for."

"Sure, sure I will.

Never mind the per cent. What's your
address?"

"Don't know. I'll write. Some place to make
a start,

A home in the world. A man can fight, and
fight,

But he needs a rest. I saw the mob a-tearing
My house all down, I heard their oaths and
abuse,

And didn't shoot, but,—well, good-bye."

The Claim-Jumper

"Good-bye."

The voice of Mrs. Kinsey sounded now :
"Best make a writing so people will understand
What you are doing, Kinsey. And Kinsey, say !
Tell Jarvis to wait. I'll fix a basket up.
Some eggs and fresh-baked bread and a pie and
jelly.
This camping out by the road is a kind of hard-
ship
When a man does the cooking."

Doubly harsh,—
Kindness from those who cursed you. Yet I've
seen
Before an opening door the trembling eyes
Of a homeless hound; and something of that
image
Takes shape when I recall the lamplight glow
Flung through the door and framed in by the
dark
On that gaunt figure. What could be the stress
Of feeling in the outcast though his hide
Be thick and coarse! Not on sod walls alone
The banded struck.

In silence Jarvis waited.

JOE TAYLOR

SEPTEMBER afternoon. The farmers'
S teams
In Belford all along the straggling street
Stamped drowsily at flies. The rough board
walk
Sounded from bank to corner store where stood
Joe Taylor in blue denims, wide straw hat,
Tall, burly, ruddy. His clear eyes looked hard
At a wagon trailed by dust in its noisy rush
From the livery. The blacksnake swung, the
horses
Leaped on the bits, the driver's comrade
gripped
The spring seat, while a huge man stood behind,
Yelling hoarse words. Traffic was paralyzed.
A staring hush fell over sunbonnets,
Bare heads out of the stores, and childish curls
Lifted to see.

"Any man in this town!
I'll give him fifty dollars if he licks me!"

Joe Taylor

From the street end the wagon made return,
The charioteering bully bellowing
Insults profane. "No man? All cowards?
Fifty dollars!

You bob-tailed, weasel-eyed, scared puppies,
you!

You stinking bastards!"

"The town marshal, where?"
Asked women. That defender lay dead drunk
At the livery stable. Bearded men felt arms
With heavy muscles. Such a strutter's comb
Demanded cutting.

Back the charioteer
Swooped in a cloud of dust, pouring abuse
And filth upon all heads. Joe halted him,
Lifting a big right hand. "I do not live
In Belford, but I'll fight you."

"Where's your home?"

"On Fairview Ridge."

Down sat the fighting man,
And in the slowly moving wagon rose
His comrade up to ring a bell, and shout,
"Fi-i-ight! On the creek ba-n-nk!"

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

First the hero's car,
Then Joe marched sturdily, while men and
boys,
A cavalcade in a great smoke of dust,
Streamed after. From the sidewalk one high
voice
Remonstrant, —“Joseph Taylor, if your wife
Was here, she'd—”

Under trees a grassy plot,
A ring of faces, little jets of talk.
“Three men last week at Kearney.” “Nearly
killed—
Bird City.” “Ain't got nothing over Joe
In size,—six foot, a hundred ninety.” “Odds?
Don't bet. The bruiser is profesh.” “Living
too fast.”
“Young bucks get mad.” “No use, Joe can't
back out!
You get a dog by the ears, you can't let go.”
Joe made no sign of hearing; to choice of
gloves
He only shook his head.

“Your cash, my lad.
Only twenty dollars, boy? Don't fool with
me!”
Contempt blared in the tone.

Joe Taylor

"I have no more.
I give you this to fight. You need not pay
Me anything if I win."

"You? Win? Ha-ha!
Ha-ha!"

"Then fight for this!" Joe's bare hand
sounded
Upon the boaster's cheek.

An old-time game
Is rough and tumble; thus wild men fought
beasts.
Grip, wrestle, strike, on ground, and now on
knee.
Blows fall with dull sound, muscles swell and
stretch;
Fighters puff, grunt, and sweat, and gather
dust;
The hot, moist skin slips in the finger clutch;
Numb pains and sharp pains soak the bruised
flesh through.
With nostrils wide, strained eye, and bloody
face,
Garments in shreds, they struggle with a rage
And craft and will beyond the power of brutes.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Twenty long minutes of such give and take,
The bully's breath came scant. Joe pressed
him hard,
And wore him under, and struck heavily
Until the prizier cried—"Enough."

Joe rose,
Wiped bloody face, drew out the yellow bill,
Thrust it upon the speechless one, and turned
Back to the village.

Ruddy sunset gleams
Fell richly all about Joe, jogging home
With empty wagon, musing how he bought
A fight with money borrowed at the bank
To buy seed grain, and won therefrom an eye
Discolored, and a lip grotesquely swollen,
Bruisings and weariness. "I wonder what
My wife—Oh, I'm a fool! But how explain?
And yet,—I couldn't help it after all."

SHOES

SHOES, shoes, —
*You must have shoes;
Well, you can't cross the plains
If you ain't got shoes.*

IN THE POTATO FIELD

AN hour till noon, yet shimmering waves of
heat

Blur the horizon. In the open field
The nervous horses drag the noisy plough
And swing their sweaty necks and switch at
flies.

The lines are knotted at Big Brother's back;
His tanned arms tensely steer the quivering
handles

While the black furrow, flowing, buries
Dead vine and growing weed. Wild buckwheat
bloom

Sprinkles the patch with color; one sunflower
Doming in blossom shades a sleepy dog.

With fingers like dry clods Father and I
Rake the cool, odorous earth; under my knees
The soil is crumbly; Brother comes to help;
I show as prize a smooth, loaf-like potato
Larger than my bare foot. He laughs and
calls

As he pours my bucket into a half-filled sack:
"A good yield, Father."

In the Potato Field

Just then a white grub
Like a fat wheel rolls down to the furrow. I
miss
The talk till I hear Father say: "The interest
Will eat up the whole crop."

I look all round.
The tone and the mystery strike to my heart.
"Here, Tige," I call, and the huge fellow
lifting
His brindled form, trots, lolling a red tongue.
I feel safe while my arm about his neck
Shakes with his breathing, and I put my cheek
On his white forehead, and I shout to Father,
"Say, can't Tige keep him off?"

"Keep who off, Boy?"

"Why interest,—or what you said. You
know."

"Too much for Tige, my son."

I cannot hear
The words to my big brother; I work hard
While the sun dries my skin and burns my shirt
Against my back; we must get the crop home.
Hope—

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Young hope persists: "Uncle Jim with his big
revolver
He had in the Civil War could watch the
patch."

"Never mind, Boy!" And though Father's
voice went lower,
This comes: "The mortgage will eat up the
place."

My quickening heart feels wonder that the men
Seem unafraid.

"And will it eat us, too?"

"Will what eat us?"

"The mur—murgridge, you called it."

"Mortgage? O no, my son. We want fresh
water;
We'll send our best man for it, and that's you.
No need to hurry."

On the homeward way
I do not stop to pick the black-eyed Susans;
I run and run, and my short lumpy shadow
Bobs underfoot. Where does this monster
hide?

In the Potato Field

In the rows of corn, or in the high slough grass?
Or the grove of cottonwoods? I keep on
running.

My mother says: "You must be tired. Come
wash;
And here's a cookie."

I trot to the field.
The sun burns on my body, and the ground
Scorches my feet. When Father takes the jug
I shake my tired shoulder.

"This mortgage, say,—
Father, what does he look like? Like a bear,
Or a big snake?"

"What, still about the mortgage?
Why, Son, the mortgage is a piece of paper.
Lie here on the empty bags with Tige beside
you,
And watch for the dinner flag."

I look awhile;
The heat haze shimmers and my eyes go shut:
And there is sunlight on a desert road
Upwestering, and a lonely wayfarer
Carrying broken sky and big potatoes

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And shoes of bullhide.—And a white blotch
spreads

Over our house, and grows and rolls like fire;
A winged monster with a smoky tail,
Roaring. They wake me from the troubled
dream:

I find the wagon loaded with the sacks
Ready for home. I hear Big Brother's voice:

"I can homestead out there. It's a good chance
For a quarter section, and if you consent
I'll start next week."

"We'll talk of this with mother."

In the soft ground the wagon wheels sink deep;
The harness leather creaks as the horses plod
And toss their sweaty necks and switch at flies.
I laugh,—the mortgage is a piece of paper;
I breathe with pride,—I know,—I know a
secret:

Brother is going away;—the sorrow rolls
Over me like dull clouds heavy with rain.

THE PARTY

MOON WORSHIP

*I HEAR them singing in the open spaces
The old, old rites, the music of the moon;
The rougher and the sweeter voices blending
To lift the joyous tune.*

*I see them dancing in the open spaces
As moonlit nights grow long;
Clasped hands and circling steps and charmed
faces,
And witchery of song.*

*A harmony of hearts to rule the singing
As loud and low they croon;
I see them dancing in the open spaces
The worship of the moon.*

I

THE GATHERING

Father and Mother Lawrence, the boy Joe,
Lottie and Elsie, all were full of life,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And fond of company. Their new sod house
Boasted four rooms. The first play-party fell
To them by luck and privilege.

That night gave
A full moon silvering all the autumn grass,
Big stars, a deep sky, and the fresh, sweet notes
Of young folk singing as the wagons rolled
On to the Lawrence house.

What jollity
Of hearty greeting! How the spirit of mirth
Beams in the twinkling eyes of Daddy
Lawrence!

I've seen him laugh among the harvest help
From his toes upward, his plump body shaking,
His hair one breeze of merriment; tonight
His round and ruddy face as yet but smiles.
Gracious and motherly the welcoming
Of Mrs. Lawrence; son and daughters join
Good comradeship with a fine courtesy
To happy guests. Nell Davis trips in first,
A lively blonde with nose tip-tilted; clumps
In her tow a bashful youth whose shiny face
Displays its freckles as gooseberry jam
Makes show of seeds; now enters Arabella,
The cowgirl who can conquer a wild pony;
Sam Violet, conscious of his first mustache,—

The Party

With him his sisters, Ella, Jessie, just
Arrived last week from Elgin, Illinois,
Ready of laugh and word; three giantesses,
Blonde, tanned, the Andersons; they till the
fields,
Having no brothers; then the bullet heads
And round, stiff bodies of the Baker boys;
Lou Silver's coming animates the room
Like living music; a gentle face,
As delicate as a flower, Ann Wilson lifts
In greeting; Barney McIntyre holds high
His dark-curled head; close at his elbow grins
Jed Butterpaugh the bashful; comes a ripple
Of wholesome, happy girls, Rose, Bessie, Jane,
And Margaret; then three Brandstetter
brothers,
Ample of girth, and rusty-haired.

The house
Grows crowded, guests move to the moonlit
grass,
Where laughters rise, and merry voices chat
In lively melody.

Joe Lawrence calls,
"Your partners! Form the lines for *Old Brass
Wagon*."

II

THE GAMES

Luck makes him head, he meets it prank-
somerly,—

Dapper Ulysses, five feet in his boots,
And proud as Satan of a black mustache
Would grace a Spanish pirate; half a hand
In the wheat, first class at baking. Buxom
Sue

Towers last in the line of girls; she could pitch
bundles

All day for any partner; mirth arises
To see them countering between the ranks,
First shuttles in the good old weaving game,
The blithesome maze of the Virginia reel:

“Meet half way to your best liking,
Meet half way to your best liking,
Meet half way to your best liking,
You’re the one, my darling!

“Lead ’er up an’ down the old brass wagon,
Lead ’er up an’ down the old brass wagon,
Lead ’er up an’ down the old brass wagon,
You’re the one, my darling!

The Party

“Wheel an’ turn the old brass wagon,
Wheel an’ turn the old brass wagon,
Three wheels off an’ the axle draggin’,
You’re the one, my darling!”

The seven stanzas near monotony
When each has led the weaving. Welcome
change
Is the graceful round of a good old harvest
dance:

“O, it rains, and it hails, and it’s cold stormy
weather;
In comes the farmer, drinking up cider.
I’ll be the reaper if you’ll be the binder,
I’ve lost my true love and I cannot find
her.”

They race through *Tansy* with a merry speed
Before the circle spins into rollicking rings
In the whirls of “Three by three with a polkay
O!”

“O, great big sheep jumped over the meetin’
house,
Over the meetin’ house, over the meetin’
house,
Great big sheep jumped over the meetin’
house,
Down in Alabama!”

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Some echo rises as from age-old rites
In *Oats, Peas, Beans and Barley. Weevilly*
Wheat

Times lightsome dancers, then a flouting song
With a flower for the girl, a gibe to tease the
boy:

“O, now we’ve got the little red rose,
The little red rose, the little red rose;
And now we’ve got the little red rose
So early in the morning!
Go choose you out a partner,
The prettiest you can find.
“And now we’ve got the old plough horse,
The old plough horse, the old plough
horse;—”

Comes *Happy Miller* with its round of shifts;
Then *Chase the Squirrel*; boys and girls in lines,
With the head couple dancing through and
back:

“Up and down the center we go,
Up and down the center we go,
Up and down the center we go
This cold and frosty morning!

“Now’s the time to chase that squirrel,
Now’s the time to chase that squirrel,—”

The Party

The girls run round the rank of girls, the boy
Circles at speed the rank of boys in hope
Of sweet reward in the lane. The lads take
space

Lengthening the line to see the pursuer puff:

“Catch her and kiss her if you can,—”

And he may catch her if luck favors him,
Otherwise,—he is chaffed for running slow.

Voices need rest. Youth turns with lively relish
To coffee and fried chicken, rolls and cakes,
Doughnuts and pies. An hour of chat and
laughter;

Then the cool moon may spill its gracious ease
On what might else seem awkward, while the
space

Lends harmony to youthful voices blent
In folk-tunes of the good old courtship games
Where dancing is the maid, romance the lady:
*Juniper Tree, We're Marching Round the
Levee,*

Here Comes a Loving Couple, Lazy Mary,
Then the lively turns of *The Girl I Left Be-
hind Me,*

With, *Here She Stands*, and a partners' march
for ending:

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"We are marching down to old Quebec,
And the drums are loudly beating;
The Americans have gained the day,
And the British are retreating.

"The war's all over, and we'll turn back
To the place from whence we started;
We'll open the ring, and choose a couple in
To see if they'll prove true-hearted."

The moon is rolling half-way down the sky
When the last wagon rumbles to the road;
And you hear *Suwanee River*, *Old Black Joe*,
And *Annie Laurie*, sweet and faint and far,
Dying in silver haze along the hills.

O prairie spaces, joyous boys and girls,
Youth, and romance, and music of the moon!

THE KEY

HE turned in at the gate and asked a drink;
Shabby, but neat of garment. His white
hat

Drooped over friendly eyes; his face was clean,
Ascetic. Surly Towser wagged to greet
His coming, and my timid little boy
Smiled him a welcome. The tramp's easy voice
Came slow and musical.

“Have you a need
For some repairs on woodwork, furniture?
Yes? Food will pay me.”

His lean hands were deft
Over an injury the walnut desk
Met in its journey. Pulsings from within,
Some charm from an intensity of spirit,
Marked the man while he worked.

He laid a key
On the cloth by his plate, and bowed his head.
Ending the meal he gently spoke:

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

“My house,—
A four room house, I built it by the stream.
The woodthrush sings, the quail are very tame,
And nested orioles and bluebirds flit
Where the wild grape is matted in the trees.
Wild flowers nod, and the untrodden grass
Waves in the soft wind, hearkening the while
To the sweet water running. Little boy,
You can come to my house and bring your smile.
I thank you now. The food was very good.
Yes, I have friends. No matter for their
names.
This is my key. I go to find my house.
I made the prettiest furniture for it.
Good-bye to you, and thank you once again.”

His sad eyes smiled farewell; he took the road,
A lean and stooping tramper by the streams.
The key seemed like a symbol from such quest
As mothers old romance. His limp, subdued,
Hinted that he had come a weary way.

THE DRIVER

I

AT THE POST-OFFICE

IT was a gray, midwinter afternoon.
A noisy wind pursued the fine hard flakes
Of blinding snow, and piled sharp, ridgy drifts
Where swale or grass gave shelter. The front
room

At Fiddler's house held loungers waiting mail.
Over the checkerboard hung four or five;
With head turned down and nose to wall, one
stooped

In the dim light to read newspaper print
Pasted upon the plaster. Brady moved
From the ruddy stove to the window. "Six
hours late."

"He'll come. He's Uncle Sam's man. Pretty
slow
Through drifts. He'll stay all night, and travel
Sunday

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

To make two trips this week." So Fiddler
drawled,

Thumping a cob pipe on his heavy boot.

With fingers upon eyes, the man at the wall
Straightened and stretched. "This time I read
her through!

How come you paste that paper bottom up,
About Guiteau a-shooting Garfield? Gosh!
A man can't hold the sense."

"I'll use more care
Next spring when I repaper; these are yellow
With age and smoke."

"I see him on the hill!"
Came Brady's voice.

"Bert, fix up, take his team;
He'll be nigh froze," called Fiddler to his son.
Out of the buckboard stiffly climbed the man
Wrapped in great coat and scarf, and looming
tall

Beside his ponies, gently freed from ice
Their eyes and mouths, instructing Bert with
care

Concerning feed and water. He came in
While Fiddler sorted mail, and stooping,
spread

The Driver

His rough, dark hands to the warmth. Above
his beard
His cheeks were weather-dark; a great scar
seamed
His forehead. He laughed back to hearty
words
From men who had come miles for letters,
papers,
And now moved out to the storm.

At dusk our fire
Roared, while outside through creaking trees,
the wind
Exulted.

“What’s your route like?”

“Up this creek,
Cross the divide, back down Old Sandy.
Twice

A week, about a hundred forty miles.
Monotonous? Most men know little road,
Travel on fair days. I have shift of light
And weather upon changing scenes. This
stream
Elbows round bluffs that shoulder in to choke
The woods and the valley. Farther up, the
groves

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Of willow, ash, and elm thin out to a line;
Beyond the headsprings, lonely cottonwoods
Bulk huge above the plum and cherry thickets;
Last, buckberry and ironweed fringe the ditch
Until the canyon ends. On the high divide
The sky is set far back, and the prairie runs
For miles and miles. Your eye can just make
out

On clearest days, far to the north, the crests
Of sandhills. Now head down the other creek.
One bit of road there,—say in blossom time,—
A soft wind soaked plumb full of meadow
smells

And fluttering the leaves,—with oriole,
Brown thrasher, blackbird, bluebird, meadow-
lark

A-chirrup and a-trill,—one lazy fleece-cloud—
The green and the sunshine—I've heard about
a place,

All things perfected: there's that stretch of
road.

"Of course, it changes. August brings a
drouth;

The dust dries in the sweat upon your face.
All months have storms; these blizzards are
the worst.

The Driver

A mile today is plenty; thirty miles,
The frost gets into the marrow of your bones,
It tires your blood and your will. Now these
men here

Wanted their mail, expected it; and I,—
I brought it. Driving mail is hard to stop.
When the contract ends you're tempted two
years more.

Seven years at seventy a month! Maybe
I'll change next summer. Ponies are too small
To farm, and I don't want to sell them off.
They might receive abuse. Poor brutes, poor
brutes!

Relay as you will, road-life is hard for them."

"You've had adventures."

He slowly shook his head.

"No, mostly weather. I used to have a soft
And ruddy face like little Mabel there.
You've seen a board under the wind and sun
And rain and sleet. It wears and warps a man
Into my shape."

Came Fiddler's easy drawl:

"Tell us about the time they stopped the mail,
When you got the scar."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

The child's voice fluted in,
"Mother says, come to supper."

We drew round
The kitchen table. Coffee, steak, potatoes
Were richly odorous; conversation fell.
Our hostess saw and did, but seldom spoke;
Neat, matronly, low-voiced, with gracious eyes
That guessed and answered thoughts. In that
low room,
In the mellow lamplight, hospitality
Admitted us to see the tender glow
Of family love; and as we broke the bread,
We knew the blessing, while we heard without
The storm's white fury moving through the
dark.

II

IN A PUBLIC PLACE

We men and little Mabel had drawn near
To the purr of the great heater. She was
 whispering
Night-counsel to her dolly. Fiddler's voice
Boomed slow: "We want the story of the
 scar,
And the highwaymen."

 That mark went white and red.
"No, I can't! Ain't worth while. Fiddler,
 you,—
You know a-plenty stories, for you made
The first house and first well along this road.
We'll smoke and listen."

 Fiddler nothing loath
Of spokesmanship began. "There's Beaver
 office—
Down stream, you know. The country was
 just new.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

The government was called on, but a woman
Settled the matter.

“In a two room shack,
Jim Lane and Mrs. Lane and three grown
girls
Kept the office. Maybe sixty dollars pay
A year for stamps he cancels. Folks for mail
All hours, and every day, and not convenient
People should just walk in.

“There was a lad,
An old bach nigh on forty years of age,
Named Charley Baxter, lived off on the ridge,
A cousin to the Baxters up above,
Set in his way, respecting his own word
As if from Scripture. Like old Shakespeare
said,

‘Now when I speak, let all the dogs keep still.’
This Baxter fellow would walk in at Lane’s,
No ceremony. And Mrs. Lane, she said,
Real easy, not at all correcting like,
‘Charley, it ain’t convenient for us folks.
Why don’t you knock? We’ll open up the
door.’

“ ‘Because,’ says Baxter, ‘this is a public place;
Government office. I come in when I like.’

The Driver

“ ‘You better not,’ she says; ‘this is my house,
And now you got your mail, clear out of it!’

“ ‘I’d stay,’ says he, ‘but the men are waiting
for me
In the road to go a-threshing!’

“Old man Lane,
Dodger of trouble, wanted to resign.
The neighbors wouldn’t hear it. All the roads
Run by his house. Government couldn’t find
Another man to take it. Baxter would,
But frightful roads to his place.

“Months rolled on,
This Baxter fellow raspin’ at the Lanes,
And folk a-grinnin’ at him ’bout his rights,
Just like a pack of schoolboys set to tease
Some chap that’s easy mad.

“ ‘Bout six o’clock
One April morning, he went to Lane’s door,
Opened and started in. Lane, doin’ chores,
Heard shrieking, run, laid holt and jerked him
out;
And they begun. Now Lane was getting old;
Baxter soon had him under pounding him.
But Mrs. Lane come charging on the scene,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Soon changed all that. She grabbed a garden
rake;

The iron teeth tore Baxter's shirt away,
And scratched his scalp, and notched him in the
ear;

His hat come off while he was fighting Lane.
She chased him, raked him good while he was
rolling

Under the barbed wire out into the road,
And threw his black hat after him.

“Old man Ryan
Was passing with a load, and so the story
Didn't lose nothing from the Irishman
That had the telling of it.

“Charley Baxter
Couldn't give in. Ridicule, too. Some fellow
Say 'garden rake' and Charley'd try to whip
him.

He wanted law, and swore to the J. P.
That Lane assaulted him in a public place.

“They all with old man Ryan, up to Stevens's
To try to settle it. The justice sat,
Heard everything all parties had to say,—
Baxter oratin' on the rights of man,—

The Driver

Rubbed his bald head, looked in the book of statutes;

Took three chews of tobacco, passed the plug;

Says, 'Out of my jurisdiction: for all turns

On whether Lane's house is a public place,

Or whether the office is a private dwelling.

The statutes are silent. I will write to Washington.

Meantime the court will order peace be kept,
And costs assessed to the plaintiff.'

"Government

At Washington ain't in a hurry. They've

A lot to think of. Finally come word,

'Tell Charley Baxter that he'll have to knock.'

And Mrs. Lane wrote: 'Baxter ain't been here

For ten months. If he comes, we'll make him
knock.' "

"What did the fellow do about his mail?"

"Changed his address to town. 'Twas fifteen
mile.

And two years afterwards he left these parts;

I don't know what become of him,—went
west."

III

THE MAN WITH THE KEY ONCE MORE

Our pipes drummed brisk approval; we refilled.
Fiddler enjoyed slow whiffs. "I wish I knew
The way to tell a thing. This is a man
A-looking for a house to fit his key."

"What! Him? Heard of him lately?"

"No."

The driver
Sat bolt upright. "That's the lad helped me
out
When I got this." A finger touched the scar.
Somewhere a cricket chirped; the storm was
loud;
Fiddler stowed chunks in the heater, and flame
petals
Curled eagerly about them.

"It was five,
No, six years back, and farther up the creek.
You see, he always follows streams. I heard
Two men a-riding up behind, and looked,
But didn't know 'em. Suddenly, my head

The Driver

Went busted on a loaded club. I lay
In the dirt and couldn't move. They started
cutting

The mail bags loose. In front, over a rise
'Bout sixty yards away he came. They saw
him.

One fired and missed. Maybe to scare him,
Maybe,—the nerves of a new hand. He just
kept walking;

They grabbed the bags and rode. The gov-
ernment

Gave them a contract down at Leavenworth.
He brought me water, and he drove me back
To the next house, and I laid off one trip.
Six years ago. I saw him just once since."

"About this house, this key?" I ventured.

"Oh,"

Drawled Fiddler; "it's his house, but it isn't
there.

He keeps the key and carries it all round."

"Yes, an imagined house? The perfect place
You'd build if you were rich?"

"No, this was real.

A house he built upon his claim. The land
Was river bottom. Came a flood. We think

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

We know the rains. It pours half a day.
Come three, four days together, local fall
And upstream waters joining, make the floods
Our fathers tell of. So the river bed
God shifted, muxed his fields, and spread fine
sand
Deep on his crops. The house was gone.
Nobody
Would recognize the place; then he went
looney,
And goes a-lookin', lookin'."

Mrs. Fiddler

Had put the little girl to bed and come
To sit in the rocker. Easy music lived
In her quiet voice. "I know, he told me once,
Or tried to tell. And my sister wrote about
him.
A girl was coming out to be his wife;
Clear from Ohio, by herself. He went
To the railroad town, and waited. No trains
came
Because of floods, and no news, for the wires
Went down. He waited, heard of wrecks;
Still waited trembling, till the third day
brought
The list of killed, her body.

The Driver

“He turned back,
Alone, the forty miles. The flood had drowned
His farm,—left just such ruin in his mind;
The stream’s bed where the garden used to be.
The suffering of it isn’t understood
Until you see the man.” Her low tones ceased,
The tears were in her eyes.

We studied, moveless,
The dull glow of the stove, and the clicks of
the fire
Till the driver’s voice began with little jars,
As when a wagon wheel grinds on the brake.
“I hope he’s in a good warm house tonight.—
It’s time to find our bunks. What a roar in
the woods
Of the wind and the snow!—This man—he
scarcely changes!
The ants soon honeycomb a log in the grass.
Life shines and showers, or blows and drips on
the mind,
And burns and freezes. Something in his
nature—

“Be nasty roads tomorrow, even if
The storm dies down, and tough on pony
flesh.”

WAYFARERS

BY THE WAVING WHEAT, BY THE
TASSELING CORN

TRAMPS, tramps, tramps!
Beggars, thieves, and gamblers,
Buffalo skimmers, rambler;
Men with the prison face,—
Old red shirt,
Stick and bundle.

Tramps, tramps, tramps!
Gray, drifting wanderers,
Beardless adventurers
Powdered with dust,—
Old red shirt,
Stick and bundle.

Their backs were to the sunrise,
Marching, limping,
With a tune in the ears
Of Cripple Creek, Denver;
Silver mines in the mountain land,
Placer mines in the golden sand;
Cattle ranches, round-ups,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Mushroom cities, railroad camps,
Adventure, El Dorado.

*Drink that rotgut, drink that redeye,
Swing the ladies, pay the fiddler,—
Skinners, forget those damn mules!*

By the waving wheat, by the tasseling corn
They footed the weary miles
With stories of life, life!
Odysseus once was a tramp!
The Prodigal Son, too.
Jesus Christ was a tramp.
Did he wear an old red shirt
And carry a stick and bundle?

The wagon road ran west,
Into the crimson west;
The railroad irons ran west
Over the desert to the beyond,
Over the mountain ranges.

*Says the railroad man before he died,—
Rocky-track, rocky-track, roly-tru-bo—
"I want you fix 'em trains so the bums can
ride,—"*

*Rocky-track, rocky-track, roly-tru-bo.
I ride on the trucks, I hang to a rod,*

By the Waving Wheat, by the Tasseling Corn

I trust my bones in the hands of God!

Rocky-track, rocky-track, roly-tru-bo.

Rocky-track, rocky-track, roly-tru-bo.

Mule skimmers, bo-tramps, prison breakers,
Gun men and faro men bound for the mines,
Wild youth a-gypsying, old floaters drifting,
On the road, companions,—
Old red shirt,
Stick and bundle.

WAYFARERS

*In they broke
Through the doors of dusk
And leaped out through the doors of darkness
Leaving storm clouds
Tinged with hail.*

I

THE SUNFLOWER THICKET

ALL this took place when I was nine years
old
In short-grass country.

An abandoned farm
Lay between Aunt Eliza's house and ours,
In August shining with wild buckwheat blossom,
Yellow with buffalo burr. In its garden space
The bumblebee went zooming into sunflowers
Over the fallen sods of a ruined house,
Over a cellar cave, over the well

Wayfarers

Where crumbling walls had let the covering
drop
Far down to chill obscurity.

The ghost
Of an old path ran through the flowering
thicket;
One little branch led right up to the well,—
Boys like to peer at danger while the wind
In the harsh leaves is muttering; the main
track
Broke out to cross the road where Wolf Creek,
bending,
Shoulders the highway. The thin trail swung
on
Whipped over by long grasses through the
timber
To the shallow ford, leg deep. We men folk
always
Took the short cut.

At sundown bearing home
Neighborly tokens through the rasping leaves
I heard above the swish and swish a voice,
A tuneful voice. My rustling ceased; I peered
Out from the covert on two roadside campers.
One weathered face studied the cookery;
The second man broke firewood while he sang:

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

*"From the hunchback's house in the round
yellow moon*

*When the big yellow moon was high,
They danced and they sang in the hunch-
back's house*

Across the gates of the sky,—

Come home,—

Across the gates of the sky."

"Hello, my boy! I see you brought your share.
We got young rabbit, sweetcorn, baked pota-
toes,

Bread, cheese, and coffee; your jelly and your
pickles,—

Sit in with us!"

Just then the singer turned:
Black! Black! The eyes of young discovery
Fed fat; I trembled and sat where he pointed.

II

BUFFALO BOB AND MOONEY GEORGE

In silence, like three friendly animals,
We stripped the sweetcorn ears; the rabbit
bones,
Then with a few dry sticks lifted the blaze,
And drawing up our legs on the soft grass,
Worshipped the living flame. A cricket
chirred
Once and a third time; then my voice found
courage:
"You—? What's your names, I'd like to
know?
And where a' you from?"

I heard the fire purr.
The black man thumbed tobacco in his pipe;
The other leaned down easy on his elbow
Staring as if the blaze were miles away,
Paused a full minute while my heart beat hard;
Spoke low:

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"Me? Buffalo Bob. He's Mooney George.
He's a professional, I look for work.
I was a boy like you and lived at home,—
No matter for the place,—away back East.
I went to school and I had lots of friends.
I'd like to see my father and my mother,—
They must be older, now.—I've no address;
And when I scratch my name at water tanks
There's no date nor direction. Once I was
A whalin' lot like you.

"At twenty-one
I came to Omaha to make my fortune.
They let me bring along my younger brother.
We hired as buffalo men: I was a shooter,
He was a stinker, had to peel the hides.
We worked all summer in the short-grass
country;
Fought Indians off and killed the buffalo.
The land burned up under the baking sun;
There was a smell of carrion in the world,—
Buzzards too fat to move, never a cloud
In all the scorching sky. It was buffalo meat
Each day and every day; our flour was mouldy,
Butter just rotten grease. I got a hanker
For like this apple jelly and sweet pickles,—
Crabapple jelly.

Wayfarers

"On the homeward road
Somebody got killed frequent, like a hoodoo
Was hangin' to the trail. Brother was killed;
Then the contractor died."

"How did he die?"

"Well, Boy, they say, just after breakfast
He walked a little piece to take a smoke;
Had a match lifted up to light his pipe,—
Fine mark, somebody drilled him. He laid
down
And kicked his heels a little in the grass.
And there was no more death among the men.
You see, Boy, some contractors have a way—
Let the men die before they draw the money.
Too long a story.— I can guess the look
Father and Mother don't give to each other
Drawing two old chairs up to the kitchen table
And leaving two a-setting against the wall.

"I don't go home. I've heard there's officers.
A man with coin can prove his innocence.
I'm off now to the mountains and the mines,—
I'll make my pile."

"I'd like to go with you.
Maybe my dad'll let me. I'll shoot grizzlies,
169

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And elk, and bighorn sheep, and Indians,
And climb the mountains."

The white man was silent
Staring into the fire. Mooney George
Hunched closer holding out a pocket flask;
Buffalo Bob had a swallow, then a sip
Blazed on my tongue. "Brandy," the black
one said;

Swigged it, screwed on the metal top, began:

"I owned a shootin' gallery back Eas',—
Rabbits, quail on the wing, and jumping deer,
Three for a dime; and I shoot for a bet.
Buffalo Bob rung in there, won every point
Six times a-runnin'. He was pointed wes'.
I sol' my gallery and greased my shoes.
We stopped awhile in the harves' fields,—
And now for Denvuh, 'less I take a notion
To run a cane rack at the county fairs.
Denvuh's the place."

"Denver?"

"The town for money.
Throw you a quarteh as men spen' a nickel
Back Eas'. And when I'm rich I'll set my foot
In Africa."

Wayfarers

"What, clean across the ocean?"

"Jus' so. My family is chiefs off there.
And the tall woods is full of trouble talk
And thunder signs, and baboon flowers that
climb,
And spotted grass around the rotting water
Where a he witch-foot drips.

"And for our friends
We got the animals, ol' Spider Man,
Monkey, and Deer, and Rabbit, Snake, and
Turtle.

Ol' Spider Man the mos'; yes, long ago
Before he learned to run upon a rope."

"Is he a man?"

"Yes, smatch than old Satan.
A conjure-man. And he can take a toadstool
And weave it up, and make the darkness
spongy
With little toadstools. All your enemies
Choke on it, swallerin'. They pant and pine
And shuddeh in the moonlight, flickeh off
When it's black, black.

"It's Africa,
And we got wizard stars you cain't see here;

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

They shine in daylight. And my brother's
servants
Have wings; and they can fetch the oldes'
spirits,—
Sun-spirit, water-spirit, poison-trees,
And the moon halo."

"How do spirits look?"

"Like antelope, parrots, and alligators;
And some is monkeys a-chasin up the trees."

Once more the flask went round.

"Our bes' is moons:
Twenty-four colored moons hang in the sky
All in one evening. They swing slowly on,
Mottled like blackbird eggs, and like young
snakes;
Plum-colored moons, and tiger-brindled moons,
And some like wings of butterflies."

He paused
And in a mellow voice began a song
Under the open sky, a spell of the moon.

*"From the hunchback's house in the little
red moon,—
Low on the bayou, low,—*

Wayfarers

*Some come cripple, and some come blind,
And some they could not go,—
Come home,—
While the little red moon swings low.*

*"In the hunchback's house are snakes and
frogs
A-praying now and then;
They crawl on their bellies, they hop on
their legs,
Shall never more be men,—
Come home,—
Their cries are the cries of men."*

"Sonny, you betteh come along with me,
And know my brothers and ol' Spider Man
And all them moons."

"Too far, Daddy won't let me."

He fed the fire. "Why, Boy, come on with us.
You're old enough. Three men like us to-
gether
Live easy, see the worl'."

A boy's heart lifts
To men's praise, to the steady flattery
Of a man's eyes. "I must tell the folks good-
bye."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"No time. We hit the cannonball tonight.
You'll learn to ride the bumpers into Denvuh."

My past and present split apart. I looked
Up through the trees and saw one steady star.
"I must go home."

Spoke Bob: "Don't mind his yarn.
I've heard him five times, never twice alike."

The black man caught my arm.

"Let loose of me!"

"Let him go, Mooney!"

"We can roll in money!
He's got a face no woman can refuse!"

I struggled fearfully. His loose-lipped grin
Sent the cold soaking through my brain and
marrow.

"Turn him loose, Mooney!"

"No, you damn buffalo skinner!
I'm goin' to have this white boy for my slave."

I saw Bob coming now; his beardy face
Shone redder than the firelight.

Wayfarers

“Drop him, Mooney!
You dirty nigger, you black bastard, you!”

Mooney whirled like an ox: “I’ll fight you for
him!”

“With fists. I’ve killed one man, and that’s
enough!”

III

THE FIGHT

Shirts came off, belts were tightened. Mooney
George
Spat in his big right hand. "Mend up the
fire!"
Called Bob. I mended it.

Now thudding blows
Ticked off the seconds, the two shifted ground:
This fight was half in shadow, half in firelight,
And I was on Bob's side, he fought for me
Against the burlier black.

The ruddy flame
Gleamed from their sweating skins. Bob
brought the shine
Into the negro's face, made him give way
With strokes to the ribs. A sudden screech
owl wailed;
The black man tottered, but kept fisting it.
Blood dripped from Bob's face and his hand
was bleeding.

Wayfarers

With loud quick labor of breath their naked
trunks
Heaved mightily. And Mooney rushed and
clinched.
They wrestled like two bulls, breaking the
bushes;
Sunflowers swished; they came down heavily,
The negro uppermost, and I could see
Black hands about Bob's throat.

I seized a stick
Was burning like a torch, and ran upon them,
And thrust the fire into Mooney's armpit.
He clamped his black arm down, sprang with
a howl
Deep, rising into shrill, like some huge beast
With a spear in its entrails jumping, yelling,
Unnerved.

Then came his onrush. With a club
He beat my blazing stick down, clutched my
arm,—
I thought the bones were breaking while I
screamed.
Then Bob came lunging right on Mooney's
shoulders,
And I was flung backward and rolling over

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Down the creek bank to the shock of the cold
water,—
Found myself swimming. I could hear the
fight
When I had landed on the other shore,
And even when I crossed the little wood,
Feeling a pathless way in the pitch dark
To the dewy meadow.

I was running home,
And crying now. The screech owls wailed
and wailed;
Prairie owls chuckled, and my bare foot
touched
A cold and slippery snake. On through the
darkness
Giddy with terror, all my trembling body
One pounding pulse.

My father let me in.
“My boy, what is the matter? Are you hurt?
You’re crying! You’ve been running!”

Panting words
Flashed the high colors of the broken story
Across the dark. My listeners were shaken
Colder than fear, and deeper than a fury.

I shivered less with them beside my bed.

IV

THE WELL

In the strong sun the burned-out sticks were
black;

Slouch hat and old bandana bundle lay

Low in the ease of the grass where amorous
crickets

On the two sprawling shirts made love. Torn
sunflowers

Trailed the dark struggle to where fresh earth
lined

A widening of the blackness of the well.

With broken glass for a mirror we stretched
flat

To trace the glimmer boring down to fall

On legs and arms confused with earth. We
shouted

Only an echo boomed through the drowsing
tune

Of the bumblebee and the rasp of the heavy
leaves.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Men found them stiff and cold. This was
their grave;
We piled the old sod house upon their bodies.
They lie here nameless, lost out of the world,
Fifty feet underground.

I have dreamed of them:
How Bob took home a fortune from the
mines;
Mooney was in the land of mottled moons
Talking with Spider Man. On August nights
When bats are busy in the sunflower thicket,
And prairie owls are hoarse with throaty
chuckling
At leaves that rasp and mutter gustily,
Mooney and Bob fight through the weeds, and
fall
To sudden death.

This knife was Buffalo Bob's.

COUNTY LODGINGS

THE ooze stones have sweated in
The look of sin, the thought of sin,
Till no power but the heavenly hosts'
May cleanse them; and old leprous ghosts
Lurk in the cobwebs of the window-hole
To film the dull eye-sockets if a soul
Look through—
Hush, hush, for it is human.

II

Mad dog, mad dog in the cell next mine!
I hear in the dark its lingering whine,
And the rattle of tooth and claw on stone.
Men pray . . grunt . . wheeze . . groan.
The sweating fear, the simmering spite
Of herded men on a summer night
Jail-nervous at rumor—
Hush, hush, behold the human.

Mad dog, mad dog in the cell next mine!

JOHNNY COOK

YOU might not class John undependable
If you first saw this bare-armed, red-
faced cook

Busy about the stove in Dorr's Café.
His cakes, T-bone with onions, floating island
Were named of railroaders and travelling
salesmen:

"A-one."

This rotund bachelor of forty
Stood just five feet; over a narrow lip
His nose hooked crimsonly, and all aglow
Across the kitchen's vapor and uproar,
The sizzling pots, the clattering of dishes
Shouting and echo-cry, his baldness moved
Majestically red.

It could be purple:
I have seen at Simpson's Park, John, breath-
less, pausing
After the Danube waltz to overhear
From a slim, black-eyed chit the silver praise
Of, "First rate for a fat man."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Luckless Johnny!

The prideful one can wear a woman's shoe,
Move with the grace of any dancing master
But for a little surplus flesh.

At paytime

Johnny is due for seventy hours of spree:
One day to get drunk, one day to enjoy it,
A third to sober up; then back to work,
Unshaven outwardly and inwardly,
And bristling for a row.

In the hot kitchen

A spud-boy senses trouble: Johnny's voice
Storming. Dorr suddenly pricks up his ears,
Drops cookery, and softly mouches out
Of the back door, abandons to his wife
The testy culprit. The woman lays reproof
Without evasion, in tone commonplace,—
No tense emotion: Johnny can't reply,—
His bubbling wrath, and his respect for woman,
And his cussology so jam the doors.
Let roustabouts be wary, then, and keep
Free elbow room for dodging. A great wrath
Is locked up in this little, fat man's body;
Blows off in nervous talk.

Johnny Cook

“My sister’s husband
Is worth a quarter of a million dollars.
I could live at his house, not work all day.
But I want independence.

“Where is Dorr?
If Dorr was here I’d have him fire you!
You lazy, niggering dish-boy! Peel them
spuds!
I’ll throw a knife through you! I’ll slice your
belly
Into white bacon slab! I’ll”—

Mrs. Dorr
Smiles on the kitchen. “Johnny, here’s the
list,
Today there’s apple dumpling extra special.”

“I don’t know why I’m working in this place.
At the hotel I can get a hundred dollars.”

“Maybe they ain’t good-natured over there,
Like I am, Johnny. And besides, they know
You’re undependable.”

“Mrs. Dorr, M-r-s. Dorr-r!
I—I—well, I can’t say it to a woman.
Where’s Dorr?”

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"Uptown. And you don't want to see him.
He's got a temper just like a hot stove;
It's a match for yours."

"Tell Dorr when he comes in,
I got to see him."

.

I saw John last fall
Upon the streets of Pueblo, very seedy,—
Ageing. His wrinkled face rolled wearily
On his fat neck. He wanted fifty cents
To telegraph back to his sister's husband
Get better clothes, and a ticket up to Denver,
And find a job.

"You see, he's worth a million.
I can live at his house, not turn a hand,
Instead of scorching over a hot stove,
Blistering my skin and breathing half-cooked
cabbage
All day. But I must have my independence.

"What has become of Dorr? That man was
lucky.

If I had only someone like his woman
To manage me I could have made a fortune.
There was a girl one time. I was afraid
Of her ridicule, and I—I can't be laughed at.—

Johnny Cook

Old days—when I liked dancing—took the
prize

For being the best-dressed man at the Fire-
man's Ball

At Simpson's Park, and the best waltzer, too.

"Thank you, I'll send it back to you from
Denver."

THE TRAMP'S BOY

I

SEPTEMBER sunlight, supper on the make,
When a droop-shouldered, dusty boy
looked in
The kitchen door. Below his ragged sleeves
Slim hands outbudded; and his large blue eyes
Were beggars.

“Lady, could you spare some bread
For Sam an’ me? An’ mebbe shoes? My toes
Is bustin’ out.—I’m ten last summer.—Sam?
Well, he’s my boss. I’d rather tramp with
Sam
Than weed the onions at the County Farm.
I thank you, ma’am.”

And he went whistling off
Boyishly to his friend, the falling sun.

*“Get up in the morning soon, soon;—
Up in the mornin’ soon.”*

II

Love has forgotten him, and the sun forgets.

QUARRYMAN'S JOY

O A half-pound rock in a Rockford sock
Is the joy of the quarryman;
A little swing with the handy thing,
And it's rise up if you can.

You may come from Kerry, and come from
Cork,
Or the county of Tyrone;
Big Bohunk, or Dutchman drunk,
You fight with the sock and stone;
Leave knife and gun to buggers that run,—
Fight with the sock and stone.

It's in your sleeve when the police come,
You hear the whistles blown;
It's in your hand when the Wops have come,
Fighting for your own.

Old beer bottle will cut and gash,
Iron will bust the bone:
Hickory leg, or stake, or peg
Is good to make 'em groan:
Knife and gun for the buggers that run,—
Fight with the sock and stone.

BREACHY

BETWEEN the river and the railroad
grade

Trickles a rushy spring where walking men
Lie down as alienly upon the grass
As after-supper rubbish. Elms and sky
In water make a shimmering melody
Of shadow tones. And through the sunlit
hazels

The tramps trudge in to build a smoky fire
And jar the nerves of nature.

Hunters blend
Into the underbrush, and plainsmen seem
Like spirits of the prairie; breachy cattle
Wear kinless colorings astray.

Like colts
They have broken the harsh picket ropes and
gone
To graze out of God's blessing where the
right
Is primitive. They carry with them curses,

Breachy

Collarless thoughts, and the old body sins,
Tobacco and rebellion and guffaw.

And a mouthorgan drones, and a man sings:

"Says, gone again, gone again.

Two short whistles and I'm gone again."

CASUALS

*I heard men talk, and I saw mistily
Into the hearts of wanderers.*

I

ADVENT

THE old stage road runs west beside the
hedge
And grove that form our windbreak; trampers
followed
That track as soon as pussywillows bloomed
And the first swallows twittered on the barn;
And when the blackbirds hung in noisy clouds
Above the ripened corn the last tramp limped
Over the hill into the hazy hues
Of Indian summer sky. Strange, roving men
Pausing at the well or resting in the shade,
Asking for shelter, food. Year after year
I can remember: in the willow trees
A joyful wren; the eyes of thirsty cattle;
Tramps' faces, tired, dusty, scorched with
sun,—
Seekers of hope, and broken men who hide.

Casuals

This was in deep July. The leathery leaves
Of sunflower, and the yellow spears of grain,
Thicket of lamb's-quarter that lined the road
Drooped in the sultry noon when three un-
shaven

And burly men in worn discolored boots
Came to our well. For walking-staff the leader
Carried a sapling oak; behind him bulked
A red-faced, red-haired giant with a shotgun
Who leaned his weapon to the kitchen wall,
And sniffed, and grunted.

“Yes,” replied my father,
“We can give you a hot meal; and afterwards,
Can you bind sheaves? We’re cradling some
down wheat.”

The youngest bent his racehorse figure far
To the bench for boyish splashings of cold
water.

I sat at table where the three gulped food
And guzzled steaming coffee. The oldest face
Was small and hairy: glossy locks grew low
Over a forehead lined with wrinkles; brows
Outbushed above bright eyes; mustachios
Like horns of water buffalo whipped across
Waves of dark beard, and weathering in the
midst

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Like some brown boulder in the hazel brush
Stood a pit-marked Roman nose.

He passed the bread
At a low-growled request. I turned to the
giant:

A stubborn cowlick crested his red hair;
A stubbly whisker hedged the heavy lips;
And around the bristling nape of his bull neck,
White on the ruddy skin, ran a hairless scar,
Inch-wide.

At a sudden barking from our dog
He jerked and started. I went out and found
A tall and stooping graybeard who laid by
His stick and oilcloth bundle in the shade,
And added to the circle of the eaters
His own lean face with high and sunburned
cheek
And drouthy eye. His lips were not too tired
To smile, his tone was courteous.

In the field
The old man got the job of building shocks;
The other three beside my father crawled
On hand and knee in the terrific heat
Banding the bearded grain, sore-handed,
sweating,
And clamorous for my jug.

Casuals

DOWN WHEAT

Trampers on the dusty road,
Will you go by?
The bearded wheat is overripe,—
Would you go by?
While whetstones ring and cradles swing,—

*O ham and eggs, and take care of your legs,
Ham and eggs, take care o' your legs!*

The waterboy is at the spring;
Will you go by?

Pick your straw to make the band,—
Lord, what heat!
Overhand and underhand,—
Wet with sweat!
Pack the bundle under knee,
Double twist, and roll her free,—
And here's your job, and here's your job!
Wheat is wheat.

Beards and thistles in arms and knees,—
Keep a-crawling on!
Sun that blisters, never a breeze,—
Keep a crawling on!
Waterboy, the jug, the jug!

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

*O ham and eggs, and take care of your legs,
Ham and eggs, take care o' your legs!*

For the cradlers have come round again,—
Keep a-crawling on.

At four o'clock
A shower drove us to the granary
To sit in the windowless gloom while the rain
drummed
Loud on the roof above the empty bins,
And briar and cob and dudeen lifted up
A fellowship of smoke.

My father said:
"This old road brings all sorts of men to-
gether;
Have you been long acquainted?"

The small man
With the boulder nose jerked out his pipe:
"Thasso.
You ought to know our names. Shake with
Mike Shivers."
The bulky one thrust out a freckled paw.
"This here is St. Joe Bill; the name I go by
Is Nashville Rabbit; and I haven't the
pleasure,——"

Casuals

"They call me Old Chi Booker," laughed the graybeard.

"Have you got 'em? Shivers, Joe-Bill, Old Chi Booker.

Names come to you from doin' things, these days."

"Likewise to Cœur de Lion," came back Booker.

"Thasso? I didn't know him. Probably He done his roadwork on the Santa Fe; Queer words out that way. Real names is like homes,—

Trouble to get and worry to keep up;
When you ain't got none, then it ain't no trouble.

"You ast how long I knowed these two: four weeks.

Met 'em at St. Joe; we're drillin' up northwest
To hit the railroad; make a little wages
As we go long."

"I never ask a stranger
How he likes tramping. You four worked so hard

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Out in my field,—I say your road ends somewhere."

"O' course," said Rabbit, "all tramps lie to questions.

It's natural and right. But most are headed
With hope to Frisco, the Black Hills, or
Denver."

"Some keep an eye turned back over the
shoulder,"

Broke in Chi Booker.

"Old stumps, let 'em rot.

Don't go a-grubbin' in the past," growled
Shivers.

"Nor speak before a farmer? This one here
Has known a-many a tramp if I can read
The scratches on his gate."

"I'd like to hear
My reputation, Nashville."

"Place to work,
And a bed in the hay. Look out, the dog he
bites,—

The woman gives you grub. I'm tellin' more
Than common for a pilgrim. On your travels

Casuals

You farmers tell your secrets to a farmer;
But with a agent, or a city feller
Lock up your jaws. Me, I'd talk to the devil
If he was hobo with me, and didn't smell
Too strong of brimstone."

Silence, abrupt silence.
Three whiffs from every pipe. A cloud enveloped
The Rabbit's head. "I'll tell you how," he
drawled,
"All this begun for me ten year ago."

II

NASHVILLE RABBIT'S STORY

"Ten year ago I went away from home.
The town was small, about two thousand
people,
And everybody knowed each other's busi-
ness,—
His family life.—That was afore my nose
Had all these marks.

"I was a carpenter,
And not too much work in that drowsy spot.
Three year before I left I built a place
To house a wife and me: you hear the rain
A-beatin' on the roof; it gives a sense
Of shelter, sympathy. I had that with her.

We're here tonight, and maybe dodge the
skunk
To ride the blind tomorrow. If a camp
Sleeps us a week, it's like a big hilltop,
And you remember, lookin' front and back,

Casuals

Chewin' the cud about it. In my life
Is just one mountain peak: it was my home."

St. Joe hitched up his belt.

"This talkin' job
Ain't always easy. A feller needs the words
Like he needs pick and pitchfork, seasoned
wood
And tempered metal.

"I ain't got the words,—
Not fine enough, I guess; it's feelin's, feelin's.

"Well, I speak out and try to tell you. She—
Her eye,—her lips,—it was like spring with
lilacs.
When her hair brushed my cheeks——"

The ragged shoulders
Lifted their stoop a little.

"Fourteen months—
There was fourteen months of me before I
found 'em.
Finished up early that day and come home
Around the rambler roses of the porch
Into the house.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"We fit, he knocked me down,
Hammered me, all the while she lookin' on."

The pipes were in their hands, and Shivers
coughed.

"Still, when I bought a gun the man vamoosed
Between two days.

"It hadn't all grown up
So simple. I remembered friendly eyes
Conversing the way old folks often do
Over the newly married, and mim mouths
Consenting on a word I did not hear.
Such gossip-tokens melted in the touch
Of arms—her arms."

Against the wall the shower
Rattled and hissed.

"And afterward I knew:—
As in a prairie fire some old trail mark
Blazes above black ashes. And I guessed
What juicy tune the grapevine telegraph
Drummed on back doors"—

Now gust on windy gust,
The rain out-talked him.

Casuals

“—left her in the house,
Only sent money to her every month,
And tried to drive my work.

“The core of life
Was gone, men pitied me. And all the while
I knowed I was no good. Drown it in whiskey?
It comes back sick and alive with your history.
I had to leave.

“And she was full of sentiment,
To praise a rosebush with the fireflies in it.
‘Beautiful, beautiful,’ she used to say.
It was the tone meant everything to me,
Intense and delicate, I can’t describe it.
I’ve seen her crying over music.

“You know,
One evening I was reading in a story
Where a child died; she give a sudden gasp,
The intake of her breath: ‘Is Julia dead?’

“This what I’m tellin’ was the outside like.
Beyond and deeper, it just can’t be told.
You’re hungry for a home. She’s heaven to
you,
Sharing her soul.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

“Well, I became a husk
Rattlin’ across the field in late November.
The day’s wage comes and goes. I’m on the
move.”

No man looked at another while the sweep
Of rain rose to crescendo, died away.
Mike Shivers swore, then trembled as a crash
Of thunder jarred us. Joe-Bill held his poise;
Chi Booker filled his briar. My father spoke:

“But you had friends?”

“Yes, but when loving faces
Dodge back from tender subjects—well, it’s
better
You shouldn’t see them.

“And I went down hill,
No good, and sure of it, and I got low.
One day at work, the woman came and laid
Her hand upon my shoulder, looked right in
My eyes. And she was pale, and she was rosy.
And her words shook me: “Don’t throw your-
self away!”

She turned about. I couldn’t speak a syllable.
Next day I heard that she had drowned her-
self,

Casuals

Which wasn't true. She had the actress moods.
And liked to play with her emotions. I—
My pride was gone, my spirit was like mud,—
I couldn't stand the strain, I come away.

"I don't fit in nowhere, so I go on
Rattlin' across the fields. I'm on the move."

UNDER ROOF

The road is long, it has no end,
Weary traveler.

A hard, hard road if you got no friend,—
Rain—rain on the roof.

A fearful road on a pitch-dark night,
Lonely traveler.

For the wind and the rain they growl and
bite,—
Rain—rain on the roof.

The nightbirds wail, the wild beasts cry,
Lonely traveler.

And ghosts on the moaning wind go by,—
Rain—rain on the roof.

Tell your tale while the storm is loud,
Weary traveler.

Pipe smoke for an incense cloud,—
Rain—rain on the roof.

III

BULLWHEEL MIKE

We shifted on our benches, drew deep breath;
The Rabbit's wiry beard had lost its tension;
With listless hand he crumbled his tobacco.
After a moment, hoarse and hesitant,
Shivers began:

“We blame the women, don't we?
We feel a thing, and tell a thing lop-sided.
What for?” A crash of thunder broke his
speech;
He shrank and quivered at the noise, and
gulped,
And growled: “Life runs a crazy lottery
With accidents and chances; runs a court.
You may draw striped clothes, no hope of
pardon
Till the black box comes.

“Looks like I'm a lifer.
You know they used to call me Bullwheel Mike.

Casuals

I can't get back my nerve. And once I was
The best man in our county.

"I drew prizes:
A wife, a child, the happiness of home;—
Eight years ago. And then the rattlin' wheel
Dished me off this."

We looked at him and waited.
You have seen a coarsened man after an illness;
Delicacy is written in a cheek
Grained with harsh moods. And here, in the
half-light
His stubbly beard was softened like a shadow
Over his rugged face.

"Death took the child.
If you set readin' on a winter evening,
And puff,—out goes the lamp:—sudden, like
that,
Her yellow curls and her warm, laughing
mouth,—
Under the dirt and the snow."

A little while
His heavy lips moved over shapeless words,
Inaudible.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"We had the empty house
The woman and me, together, till the winter
Found out a way, pneumonia.

"First the lamp,
And then the stars go out. And I got lost,—
Off'n the trail in the dark. My friends and kin
Done everything. No use. I couldn' bear
Our home; too fierce a blinding blizzard
Blowed over me. I had to have distraction.
Hunting that is like running after ghosts;
—Slip through your hands, and then your
breath is gone.

"I found a bigger town, drink, company
That could be bought. And there were rainy
days

When memory was busy here inside
Trimming the rottenness out with a knife,
A burning knife. And yet I couldn't stop
No more'n a heavy load on the mountain side,
Wet track, and busted brakes.

"One afternoon
The police sloughed me up and chucked me in
Near the jail front. And there were extra
guards
And a mob gathering. Nothing in this world
Is half so terrible.

Casuals

“A human mob!
With axes, guns, a rope. I watched the fracas
From the jail window.

“Say now, in your dreams,
Did you ever talk with ghosts? It's horrible;
And bughouse crazy afterward. So this.

“They got the door down and came pouring in
To the dusky corridor. A prisoner
Pointing my way, shouted, ‘That's him!’

“The sledge
And axe in a sudden glare! I yelled, they
yelled!
I was jumpy, paralyzed, and on the run.
A mob comes up just like a fighting boar
With sidling tusks and shifty, crazy eyes.

“And unready—no chance to toughen up my
soul
And bluff against the shock and the fear!

“The grate
Went smash, down come the fists and the clubs,
Then a rope around my neck a-jerking me
Along a bristling, cursing lane.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

“No way
To tell about a mob. You see the guns
And fists close up,—you get burned by the rope :
And sometimes, way back, a waving of a crow-
bar,
A pick, or a hatchet. And a noise keeps boiling
Out of their throats, partly a roar, and part
Fun,—merrymaking.

“I went stumbling on.
Bleeding and bruised to where a woman sat
In an old kitchen chair. Two older women
Sat right against her; she was shivering
On that hot August night.

“I seen one time
A picture might of been that woman’s face;
But long ago, hundreds of years, maybe.
The cureless terror of the torchlit mob,
And the tremorous shadowy mouth,—hers was
the same.

“She let her eyes flame on me, she was dumb,
Then shook her head: ‘No, this is not the
man.’

“A big brute argued with her. Once again
The headshake, ‘Not the man.’

Casuals

“A shout rose up :
‘Well, hang him anyway! Pull on his necktie!’
And the crowd whooped and yelled.

“Then the woman trembled
Up into her chair, and stretched out both her
arms :
‘No, no! Innocent, innocent!’ Some men
listened
Till she fell fainting.

“Then a fight went on.
They were like cattle crazy over blood ;
Bawling and bellowing, leaping, clashing horns,
Till a crash came down on me, and suffocation.

“I found myself in the fields beside a road—
An August morning, a changed world for me.
After there’s been a rope around your neck
You don’t go home.

“I got life’s convict mark.
No use a man to fight against his nerves.
Come heads or tails, one flip!

“I was set rolling,
And I’m old Shivers, once was Bullwheel
Mike.”

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

He ended to the slow drip-drip of the eaves,
And from the door against the brightening sky
Joe Bill growled jerkily:

“Bah, I have seen you
Brutal as a bull and dirty as a pig
In shantytown and with the quarrymen;
And now this damned slop-over of self-pity,—
I’ve got to breathe outdoors.”

Old Bullwheel’s voice
Boomed in the hollow bins: “Pitying our-
selves?
Who’s got a better right? We have been men;
And we remember it!”

In the intense pause
My father rose: “Come, Sonny, hunt the eggs
For Mother, now; and in a half an hour
Fetch up the milkers. Yes, Booker, a tub?
It’s in the washhouse; there’s a load of fodder
Heavy with roastin’ ears down by the barn.
You boys can husk a mess to cook for supper.”

BREAD AND CUP

THE food gods are the oldest gods,
The friendliest on earth;
The graces of the table,
A fellowship of mirth.

*Red tomato and sweet potato,
Roasting ear and pease;
Biscuit hot with a honey pot,
And yellow cream and cheese;
Chicken fry, and coffee and pie,
And applesauce and plum;
Red raspberry, oxheart cherry,—
And all the food gods come.*

The food gods are the heartiest gods
For laughter while we eat;
The food gods are the happiest gods
At grace before the meat.

In savage men and savage clan
When the world was growing up,
A stranger won to brotherhood
By the rite of the bread and cup.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

O, meat and drink at a social board,—
The wolvish eat alone;
And bread and cup for a wandering guest
When the supper horn is blown.

*It's red tomato and sweet potato,
Roasting ear and pease;
Biscuit hot with a honey pot,
And yellow cream, and cheese;
Cricken fry, and coffee and pie,
And applesauce and plum;
Red raspberry, oxheart cherry,—
All the food gods come.*

IV

THE CONFESSION OF CHI BOOKER

The men drew chairs back in a homely way
From the supper table. Booker's roving eye
Lit on old friends: "What, Shakespeare, and
Tom Sawyer?
New, and good print. I know the printer business."

"And on the road in rags?" grinned Joe Bill.

"Yes.

Life is a strange thing. I am far along.
This was the easiest way for me. And you?"

"My reason is my reason. Do you know
Baltimore Thumb?"

"Not Baltimore. Your tone
Forbids him Christian burial; leave him rot.
Pipes and tobacco make a whole gang brothers.
We'll sit here on the porch."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"To lie?" laughed Joe Bill.
"I'm sick of heroes and the old maggoty lies
About themselves. So don't go boasting,
Or slobbering sentiment."

The old man's forehead
Puckered as he drew on his pipe: "By God,
Life is jam full of color and feeling.

"I—
I never was a hero. Years and years
I've seen myself comedial. And ridicule!
Common fools run scot free and gang together
To hang it on the odd ones."

"Did you fight 'em?"
"Too big a contract: only in my mind.
Inside, I laughed at myself and their contempt.
I didn't want to sour, and kept a-churning."

"Maybe an odd religion?"

"No."

"Inventor?"

"No, simply this.—And you will all despise me.
May as well tell you.—I wanted to write
poems.
All my life long I wanted to write poems."

Casuals

Humoresque lines were hardening to bronze
In the gaunt face. "I've simmered on the fire
Of ridicule until I'm sodden, but still—
Today, out in the granary I made this."
He showed a folded paper.

"Mr. Booker,
You'll read it to us." The voice was my
mother's.

"Lady, at your request."

The pipes came out.
To the quavering voice we listened open-
mouthed.

"Even in the darkening moment that shall test
His unfinished work, write failure over all,
His slackening lip will puff a hazy jest
At Rosinante's rider and the quest
Of windmill giants;— even while the call
Sounds loud within his overlaboring heart:
'Thou, too, hast played a like comedial part.' "

The slow strained reading ended in a silence;
Nashville looked down his nose, and St. Joe
smiled
Indulgently. The voice of Booker rasped:

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

"Yes, I'm comedial; you can laugh, young man,
Without your hand before your mouth."

"Oh, no.
Why, Mr. Booker, there's no laughing at you;
But we can't understand. You'll have to tell
us.

I'll let the dishes wait. Why are you tramp-
ing?"

"Your question, lady, is unfair: and if
I try to answer, it's a long, long story
With a woman in it. Yet, nevertheless:—

"I've got my weakness. I give in to folks,—
Manageable. A woman picked me out
And married me 'bout eighteen years ago.
She's a good woman, regular at the church,
Like clockwork about meals, an' keeps the house
Without a speck of dust. When she found out
About my writin' she laid out a program
To keep me busy doin' other things.
Prayer meeting come to our house; company
often;

And little jobs to keep the garden prim.
She's masterful, she laid it on her conscience
To break me of it. At the printin' shop
My hours was steady full. If I was late

Casuals

A-gettin' home she had to know the reason.
She wanted to be clean inside my mind
Sharin' it with me, wanted to lay out
Emotion and repression to match hers.

"I couldn't write the thoughts down I had
walkin'
The road to work and back. Yes, we had
words;
I'm not the man to quarrel with a woman—
Manageable. She got the bridle on me;
She hitched me up and drove me her
direction,—
Worried me on the precious things in my mind:
Years, years of it.

"She had another side,
Grievin' and worryin' over my behavior;
One look, and I'd give in.

"And once, my poem
Was printed in the *Beacon* in our town,
And all the boys was laughin' 'bout it to me,—
Why, then, we had a quarrel, and no more.
I never answered back to her no more.

"I had some good books. There's a lot in
writers.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And women swap the last of E. P. Roe
Along with kitchen gossip just for the spice.

"John Bunyan gimme a notion; six months after
Readin' of Walter Raleigh it got substance.
Just let them put me decently in jail
And I would write.

"I pondered on the subject;
Full of objections. Martha kept a-pryin'.
Saw I was worried, and kept naggin' of me.
I'd make my mind up to it in the evenin',
And then by daylight it seemed foolisher
Than jumpin' off a bridge.

"Oh, sure I did.
I went down by the jail and looked it over.
Empty,—except for dust and mice and spiders;
The plaster was discolored by the rain.
Lonely, and full of shadows.

"Sheriff asked me:
'John, are you goin' to write a little poem
About our jail?'

"You see, I didn't want
To hurt nobody. Stealin' was the best.
I took the hand cart just at dusk. Joe's shop
Had quarters of fresh beef. I grabbed a leg

Casuals

Down from the hook and laid it on the cart.
Joe comes out:

“ ‘Where a’ you goin’ with that beef?’
“ ‘Takin’ it home.’

“ ‘It costs you twenty dollars;
I’ll put it on the book.’

“I got it home
Through lots of joshin’ ’bout a barbecue;
Then speaks my wife. They say that I am
stubborn;
To jaw a stubborn man is utter folly.

“I tried again. I went to The Emporium
And laid a suit of clothes across my arm,
And the storekeeper says, ‘John, let me take
’em;’
I was as far off as the sidewalk with ’em—
‘I’ll wrap ’em up.’

“Well, there was talk of this
Come to my wife. The neighbors sifted down
Heaps of advice, and worse, a pile of pity.
Her book man had gone dizzy in his garret.
He’s a-gettin awful queer.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

“There’s other sides
Of our life, too. A lot of everydayness:
The old cat purring on my knee, and kids
To holler at me through the hollyhocks;
A cherry tree in blossom; boys at the shop,
Fond of me, raggin’ me; and my old woman
Pourin’ my coffee, worryin’ about me,
Scrubbin’ the porch and worryin’ about me,
Frettin’ to houseclean me on the inside,
And throw my painted fancies on the bonfire,—
Hang up her mottoes.

“She was fond of kids:
Bake ’em a Noah’s ark of animals
Of the cookie kind, and kiss the little feillers,
And tell ’em stories.

“But she was a woman
Kept all of the commandments that says
‘Don’t.’
My downfall made a cleavage in her life.
And me—I couldn’t stop. I felt the years
Risin’ about my chin to drown me out,
And no work done.

“I saw that I must steal,
Nobody to interfere. And a gray horse—
I led him home and tied him in my shed

Casuals

All night and half a day. The neighbor come
Mad about youngsters doin' it.

“ ‘John, are you
Plum off your nut? I ought to paste you for it.
Halloween! Hell of a prank! You're old
enough
To wear long breeches!’

“I remembered then,
That it was Halloween.

“The talk begun
Of callin' me before the insane commission.

“She said: ‘You ain't so crazy. Why, you
show
Good sense at meals and at your work.’

“And down
At the printin' shop they joked and carried on
I was lame in the head from writin' poetry.

“She said: ‘Some stubborn nonsense is a-bilin'
In you.’ I felt I got to make it go.

“Well, there was prohibition in our state
I took and sold some juice,—it wasn't difficult.
But rumor beat the officers to my house,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And I found Martha fainted on the couch
And women fannin' her. They wouldn't speak
to me

In my own home. And pretty soon the marshal
Led me down Main Street, everybody starin'.
Some fellows wanted to bail me. I said 'no.'
I stayed in jail three days, and all the time
Had company. They talked repentance—
talked

Of my intelligence, kleptomania,
And the insane commission.

“They shouted at me
As if I couldn't hear. And friends would
holler:

‘Do you know my name?’

“And they kept yellin' 'bout me
Like I was furniture: ‘No, no, not violent!’
‘She wants to have him in her custody;
He'll be a lot of bother.’

“I give the jailer
A bottle I had hid and come away.
It's twelve years since.

“I walk with a short step;
And you young chaps 'll beat me to the Hills,—
A long road for unlucky legs.

Casuals

"Go back?

A little money would make me big enough
So they would all forget, humor my whims,
Except—

"Well, once I had a cousin
Walked into Denver with a dime in his pocket;
A rich man now.

"Laugh! laugh, Joe Bill, for I
Don't care one damn for what you think!"

"No, Booker.
Give us another poem, best you got."

"Read, read!" called others. Booker fumbled
out
A printed sheet with ragged creases.

"This
Was in the *Beacon*; it's about some children."

"Le's have it, Booker."

In the early dusk
The old man squinted at the lines; his tune
Was high and nervous like a skittish horse.

"Bill Ninetoes was a barefoot lad,
Couldn't run quite straight:

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

The axe it missed the kindling wood
When he was only eight.

"Bill Ninetoes was nearly twelve,
Happy-On-The-Way was three;
Magazine was ten years old
And pretty as could be."

"Maxine, but Happy called her Magazine."

"Happy-On-The-Way had silky hair
Yellow-like and red;
Mouth was always set to laugh
When it wasn't being fed.

"Happy's little legs were brown and fat,
Would not be kept still;
Out of the yard and down the road
A-keeping up with Bill.

"And these three village children
Went singing to their play;
Bill Ninetoes, and Magazine
And Happy-On-The-Way."

"No, no, Lady, we didn't have no children."

Casuals

BALM

The balm is lush, the soil is rich,
And purple asters blow
Between the hedge and the roadside ditch
To watch men come and go.

*And it's fare you well.
I am left alone.*

The wind is loud and the wind is low,
And the leaves say "hush and hush,"
To the ripening hours of afternoon
When a warbler sings or a thrush.

*And it's fare you well.
I am left alone.*

They saw where the traveler laid him down
The dove and the cuckoo,
The balm and the feverfew,—
To slumber deep in a long, long sleep,—
Balm in the moonlit dew,
Balm in the moonlit dew!

*And it's fare you well.
I am left alone.*

V

THE LAST OF BALTIMORE THUMB

In sunset quiet of the porch we heard
Faint clinking of the dishes to the shelves.
My father spoke:

“I’ve work tomorrow for you.
Yes, all of you.—There’s other kinds of tramps
Than you be——”

“Forty coffins full,” puffed Booker,
“Runnin’ from the routine in the manure;
Runnin’ from love and bloodhounds. And the
mothers——”

“They’re lucky not to know,” my father said.
“Some trampers draggle down below the
beasts.
One last year—Baltimore Thumb,—you men-
tioned him:
Total depravity!”

Joe Bill only nodded.

“I knowed him at the quarries,” broke in Bull-
wheel.

Casuals

"The blasting blows my nerves out. I'm like
an apple,
Frozen an' thawed an' on the way to rotten.
He kept a-bitin' me till I took a slap
At the dirty pest, and he lit out."

"Look a-here,"

Booker fired in: "Tramps can't be more con-
sistent
Than other men, and doors of spiritual beauty
In the worst brutes——"

St. Joe's warm face had hardened
Cameolike. He roared: "No use of yapping
Mush talk. He's a boneless crook!"

The angry voice
Of Booker overrode the growl of Bullwheel:
"My young hardshell, what cut you loose from
home?
Sentiment, feelings! Your own yarn will prove
it."

Father was calm and slow: "If you've a
quarrel
You'll take it down the road. Here's Mother,
now,
With a pitcher of buttermilk."

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

The empty glasses
Clinked on the tray, and Booker held his wrath
And filled his briar.

My father turned to Joe Bill:
"You knew this fellow Baltimore, I guess?"

"Knew him as Albany Pete. The bulldog bite
That only left his thumb came afterward.
A spoiled child penned up in a sleepy village,—
Over the fence, and—petted by his parents.
Shirker of all but pleasure. Got the vices
With his first beard and polished them in
prison.
He——"

"Was he livin' in your town?" asked Booker.

A match at his pipe flared out on St. Joe's face.
"Why, no, I met him at a camp. I've been
At his mother's house. You know how such
things are:
A gray-haired woman worrying on one thing
Day after day, and sighing, hoping, crying:
Feeding the trampers. You can't talk to her
Long at a time; it is too pitiful.
You can't tell her the truth. Where is he now?
I am to write."

Casuals

"Yes, but your story, Joe Bill?"

"You must excuse me for not telling mine.
Too much of other people, other thoughts.
So,—let me take your fiddle from the wall—
Tunes for my stint.—What is your news? His
mother
Sends him a message; she ain't been real well;
She wants him home."

"Fiddle is hired man's;
He ran off with our snakebite remedy
Fourth of July, and we ain't seen him since.—
My news is heavy.

"If you go down the road
A half a mile you'll find a patch of weeds
Inside some rails against the hedge. He
stopped
In here, and sung about old Sitting Bull
A-histing up the scalp. But then, his actions,—
I sent him down the road.

"He made his camp.
He was all right at dusk, and in the morning
He seemed too much asleep when I went by;
And when I hollered at him, didn't answer.
I went and touched the fellow; he was dead.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Coroner came and said that he was dead.
No one would take him; we couldn't let him
lie;
We dug a hole and put the body in
Close to the hedge."

Unsteadily the strings
Bumped into tune: "The end of Baltimore
In the dark, in a patch of weeds beside the
road!
Well, that's what tramps must look for.

"Yes, the rosin.
His father and mother, now, ought they to
know?
Or should they just go on?

"It's a fair fiddle.
I feel—" he plucked out high, thin, wailing
notes—
"Will you have *Fisherman's Hornpipe*, *White
Cockade*,
The Girl I Left Behind Me, *Frozen Charlotte*,
Or *The Dying Cowboy*?"

"All of them," said Mother.
He played, we listened. Nashville Rabbit
asked:
"Give us *The Devil's Dream*."

Casuals

That passionate piece
With its weird climax, saved by country fiddlers
To show their skill, swept through us. When
he turned

Into the *Miserere*, all the group
Were plastic to its pathos. Shivers' face
Stared droopingly as if he gazed once more
On the yellow curls, and restfulness had soaked
His nerves all through. The Rabbit's erect
head

And fierce mustache looked like a general's
Leading a charge. Chi Booker's eyes were
shut,
And shining tears rolled down his wrinkled
cheeks.

Joe Bill let fall the bow. My mother said,
After a silence that seemed minutes long:

"Why don't you quit your wandering and go
home?

You must have a good home."

"I haven't now;
And the green grass is growing where they gave
My name a funeral in unhallowed ground."

He poised the bow again. Sad melody
Communion of young heartbreak with the stars,

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Filled all the dewy shadows where the wind
Moved odorous of stubble, flower, and sheaf.
His face grew stony as a deep-cut quarry,
And he broke off; then came the *Hal and Tow*
With a rollicking mood, and loosening the
strings
He put the fiddle to bed.

That day was done.

OLD MAN WINTER

Go down the road, and down the road
By leafless hedge and willow;
And stretch your bones on the frosty ground
With shoes to make a pillow.
But it's south, boys, south!
Run away from old man winter.

*"O rain come wet me, sun come dry me,
Wind o' winter don't come a-nigh me!"*

It's late to limp by hill and plain
In rag o' coat and breeches;
The dogs they chase me out of the road
And hunt me down the ditches.
But it's south, boys, south!
And run from old man winter.

Casuals

*"O rain come wet me, sun come dry me,
Sleet o' winter don't come a-nigh me!"*

I follow the duck and the mourning dove,
I'm headed south for winter;
I'll throw my feet on a Dixie street
Or lie in jail for the winter.
And it's south, boys, south!
Away from old man winter.

*"Rain come wet me, sun come dry me,
Moonlit snow, O don't come a-nigh me!"*

JOE

*There ain't no use that I can see
For all this fuss and flurry;
This world belongs to God and me,
And I can let Him worry.*

I

THE CABIN

IN a waste corner by the river bank
Joe's shack had homed. You pushed in
through the weeds
And came upon the creature. She was formed
Of junk and driftwood: puncheon plank re-
deemed
From the flooding water; a square of fancy
zinc;
Rusty sheet iron, barbed wire, and gunny sacks
Patched in with careless carpentry; the door,
Grained oak with a bronze knob, no touch of
paint.
Joe used his luck as it came. Plenty of cracks
For light and air; for window,—well, one
board

Joe

Hung from three leather hinges,—hook it up
Or let it hang. At labor by the day
Joe might have bought good stuff and built a
cabin,—
Meanwhile—

There was a grassy riverside
With oak and walnut trees, and next the stream
A pebbly landing cove among the willows
Where red-winged blackbirds chuckled, or at
sunset
Quarreled for choice of lodging; and above,
The untrodden grama flourished delicate leaves
Round milkweed flower and aster.—Lazily
The skiff swung with the current, hour by hour,
While Joe sat hunched with eye upon the
bobber,
Musing between the puffs of his short clay pipe
Upon the dragonflies and water-skipppers
And the colors of the summer.

Joe's round face
Would laugh a greeting if some tousled boy
Came for a skiff ride or for a tricky puzzle
Cleverly whittled. And the man was clean,
And kept himself clean-shaved and not much
ragged.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And he would laugh down slurring words when
mothers
Classed him with poorhouse folk and feeble-
minded,
Unless they said: "Bad company for young-
sters!"
Then he was downcast, silent, maybe angry.

For Joe—Joe was the village unreliable.
Hire him for tomorrow he'd show up
Most like a week from Thursday: "Fishin'
was good;"
Or, "I plum forgot it early in the morning
Till it was too late for a full day's work;
Sorry, and——"

Well, they asked him at the trial
The length of time he stuck to his longest job.
"Five weeks."

"What doing?"

"Shootin' prairie dogs,
Was killin' the trees on Wilson's timber claim.
Trees is a bit like folks."

His trial? Yes.
You see, they put Joe in the county jail.
Charge of pig-stealing.

II

JOE'S ACCOUNT

"It was the tenth of May. I skiffed across,
Mid-afternoon, and fished the swimmin' hole,
And got two cats about a pound and a half
Apiece; I see some bees and stepped ashore,
Look for a tree; and comin' back I saw
A middlin' size red shote aboard the skiff,
Notch in his ear and white spot in his forehead,
Gobblin' the last of the fish. Pig wasn't scared;
I rowed home, and he scrambled out and
followed,—

Squealed when I shut the door, kept wantin' in.
I give him a little rope in the high grass,
And fed him good; and he was glad to see
me,—

Would grunt and curl his tail. Ain't ary shote
In Melrose County furnished better quarters
Nor better bringin' up."

"You stole that pig."

"He et my bait and my fish. And you might
say

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

He just come home with me—was trespassin'
About my house."

"But you don't own that place."

"I rent it. I give three days' work a year."

"You are a loafer. You lie round there
drunk!"

"O, no, not that. I—well, maybe I do
Sometimes take a drop too much. The Fourth
and Christmas

Come only once a year. They never print
I'm off to Kansas City, legal business;
Be gone a week. One day's enough for me."

"You are a thief. The calaboose will cure
you."

"I ain't a thief. I would a took him back,
But Zeba Yellaneck borrowed off my skiff."

III

LODGINGS

From lad to lad shrilled feverishly the news
Of the jailing. Up frothed boyish sentiment
Quickly fermenting, dissipating: for red
And green on weather-beaten barn and crib
Flamed circus bills,—ah, rich to the childish
mind
As clover bloom to bees.

One youngster's eyes
Devoured them while he drummed his bare
heels sore
In urging Dobbin townward. Up the street
High colors led him to the courthouse
square;—
Yes, even on the jail,—circus posters!
Well, why not visit Joe?

The boy's bare feet
Measured the courthouse gloom, moved on
across

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

The deep red clover to a squat frame building
Beaten by sun, blanketed with foul odor,
Besieged with flies.

"Johnny?"

"Yes, Joe."

"Are you comin' back to town?"

"On circus day."

"Yes? would you do me a little favor?
Go to my house and bring my overalls,
My hatchet and thick-bladed butcher knife,
I'm whittlin' a big puzzle. Keep it secret.
Just you and me. And sneak me in the bundle,
When the parade is due. You won't tell no
one."

"No, double-deed, I'll never. Joe, this place
Is awful, makes me sick."

"Don't say you been here.
And maybe now, I am bad company."

"Good-bye to you, Johnny. Wish we could go
swimmin.' "

IV

ACCESSORY

Next week the *Melrose Herald* burst its
buttons

Over the jail delivery. What sensation!
"We catch a desperate criminal; other thugs
Fearing betrayal help this jailbird out;
Find the accessory, let him rot in prison
Life-long!"

.

There was a barefoot village boy
On whom the word *accessory* could bring
shivers;

And after all these years that word can thrill
him.

He learned of late that somewhere out in
Kansas

Along a little stream, a cabin shelters
A round-faced laughing man who lives by fish-
ing,

Gives skiff rides to the boys and whittles
puzzles.

"A bit like Joe," he says: "I am accessory."

OLD LONG TOM

"Hell's bells ring at your burying!"—Old
curse.

IT was old Long Tom and he wouldn't
drink,—

We're buryin' old Long Tom!

So we mixed him linseed oil with ink,—

We're buryin' old Long Tom!

We poured the liquor down his throat,

And made him blat like a billygoat,

And let hell's bells ring,

For we're buryin' old Long Tom!

Old Long Tom was a brakey boy,—

We're buryin' old Long Tom!

A-killin' boes was all his joy,—

We're buryin' old Long Tom!

Couplin' pin or a lump of coal,

And you're under the wheels, God damn his
soul!

And let hell's bells ring

For the shack that was old Long Tom!

Old Long Tom

Teakettle Tex was a crazy man,—

Buryin' old Long Tom!

Rode the trucks with a dynamite can,—

A-buryin' old Long Tom!

He hit the brakey on the snout,

His nose went in and his brains came out,—

And let hell's bells ring

At a-buryin' old Long Tom!

Section boss was a-makin' hay,—

Buryin' old Long Tom!

A-cleanin' up the right of way,—

Buryin' old Long Tom!

He dug a hole below the dump,

And we swung the body in with a bump,

And let hell's bells ring

For buryin' old Long Tom!

BINDLESTIFF

*O*H, the lives of men, lives of men,
In pattern molds be run;
But there's you, and me, and Bindlestiff—
And remember Mary's Son.

At dawn the hedges and the wheel-ruts ran
Into a brightening sky. The grass bent low
With shimmering dew, and many a late wild
rose

Unrolled the petals from its odorous heart
While birds held tuneful gossip. Suddenly,
Each bubbling trill and whistle hid away
As from a hawk; the fragrant silence heard
Only the loving stir of little leaves;
Then a man's baritone broke roughly in:

*I've gnawed my crust of mouldy bread,
Skimmed my mulligan stew;
Laid beneath the leafless hedge—
Sleety night-winds blew.*

Bindlestiff

*Slanting rain chills my bones,
Sun bakes my skin;
Rocky road for my limping feet,
Door where you can't go in.*

Above the hedgerow floated filmy smoke
From the hidden singer's fire. Once more the
voice :

*I used to burn the mules with the whip
When I worked on the grading gang;
But the boss was a crook, and he docked my
pay—
Some day that boss will hang.*

*I used to live in a six by nine,
Try to save my dough—
It's a bellyful of the chaff of life,
Feet that up and go.*

The mesh of leafy branches rustled loud,
Into the road slid Bindlestiff. You've seen
The like of the traveler: gaunt humanity
In stained and broken coat, with untrimmed
hedge
Of rusty beard and curling sunburnt hair;
His hat, once white, a dull uncertain cone;

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

His leathery hands and cheeks, his bright blue
eyes

That always see new faces and strange dogs;
His mouth that laughs at life and at himself.

Sometimes they shut you up in jail—

Dark, in a filthy cell;

I hope the fellows built them jails

Find 'em down in hell.

But up above, you can sleep outdoors—

Feed you like a king;

You never have to saw no wood,

Only job is sing.

The tones came mellower, as unevenly

The tramp limped off trailing the hobo song:

Good-bye, farewell to Omaha,

K. C., and Denver, too;

Put my foot on the flying freight,

Going to ride her through.

Bindlestiff topped a hillock, against the sky
Showed stick and bundle with his extra shoes
Jauntily dangling. Bird to bird once more
Made low, sweet answer; in the wild rose cups
The bee found yellow meal; all softly moved

Bindlestiff

The white and purple morning-glory bells
As on the gently rustling hedgetop leaves
The sun's face rested. Bindlestiff was gone.

*Oh, the lives of men, lives of men,
In pattern molds be run;
But there's you, and me, and Bindlestiff—
And remember Mary's Son.*

TIE-PASS

SECTION boss is Slewfoot Bill,—
S You swings your shovel and you works
with a will;
If you spit on your hands or stop to swear,—
“You damn hobo, git to workin’ there!”

It was Lord Scut come mouchin’ by,
Hole in his hat an’ a hokus eye;
Clothesline belt an’ pants too small,
Skatin’ on his uppers from spring to fall.

I seen the creek an’ the campfire smoke,
I leaned on my shovel till the handle broke;—
Clay on the feathers an’ clay on the shuck,—
Down tools, an’ follow my luck.

ECHOES FROM THE WAR

THE FIRST FROM ANTIOCH JUNCTION

DOWN to the station through the deepening mist,
All Antioch, fifty people, on that morning
Had come to see Jim off; barefooted children
In unionalls; women with flowery hats;
Doc Evans arguing hotly to the blacksmith,
Outvoiced a trifle by two fighting dogs,
Till the grinding jar and roar as the train
 slowed in
Scared out the curs.

 Stoop-shouldered and embarrassed,
Jim strode for the car steps. A hush fell
 round;
The swing of his coat revealed the bright silk
 flag
Pinned on by the W. R. C. A lad's voice
 shrilled,
"You bet Jim Burney'll fight! Fight! Fight
 the Germans!"

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Then laughing cheers outbroke, and men swung
hats
With a hoarse shouting; something more than
mist
Made wet the cheeks of women. A clear treble
Lifted the words. "Mine eyes have seen the
glory"—
All voices joined, Antioch thrilled like one soul
Into that battle hymn.

The last to leave
The dingy, splintery platform was Jim's
mother,
A quiet little woman. Her low words
Answered my look: "I know the camp is only
A hundred miles,—I ought not be a-cryin'.
But Jim is gone! my boy, my boy is gone!
He won't come to the table laughing at me
For takin' too much care of him. He's gone."
She walked off slowly through the drizzling
rain.

BROTHERS, WON'T YOU JOIN US
NOW?

I HAD a dream of the day of peace,—
Brothers, won't you join us now?
I seen Jesus walking up the street,—
All alone, my Lord!
Save us, O Master!

Autos stopped and the noise went low,—
Brothers, won't you join us now?
People gazing to see him go,—
Save us, O Master!
I bury my grief for my soldier son,—
All alone, my Lord!
Under the growing grass.

Jesus smiled and He waved his arm,—
Brothers, won't you join us now?
He opened up the East and the lands were
dumb,
And He opened up the West, saying, "Peace is
come."
All alone, my Lord!
And His voice was like the viol strings
Or a gentle rain in the leaves.

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Jesus walked no more alone,—

Brothers, won't you join us now?

The next come long was Mrs. Hallelujah

With her little naked son in her arms.

Angels singing, "Peace is come,"

Like stars in the milky way,—

Ah yes,

No more war, my Lord,—

And it's brothers, won't you join us now?

The wife of Hallelujah sang

And the sun begin to rise;

And the wife of Hallelujah sang

And summer filled the skies;

And the little Hallelujahs sang,—

Save us, O Master!

No more war, my Lord,—

And it's brothers, won't you join us now?

SOLDIER BOY

*Rules of the service are water-tight,—
The dam goes out, she floods all night.*

SOLDIER boy, soldier, where have you
been?"

"All through the city streets and back again."

"Soldier boy, soldier, what did you see?"

"The lips of frailty, she spoke to me.

"Got my papers, and I drew my pay;
My own man since yesterday.

"I'm all cleaned out, no place to go;
The dice and the women they won my dough,
And I don't want my folks to know
How I acted the fool and sunk so low.

"Lend me a dollar to buy me a bed;
I'll get up in the morning, earn my bread.

"I'll rustle a job and save my pay,—
Hit for home the shortest way."

A SEDUCIOUS NAME

ALBERT'S big feet swing proudly through
our fields,—

The kind of feet one never would believe in,
So far they overlap his monstrous shoes.
He holds his chin as high as a wild horse,
The only colored man in all our country.

Our fence had need of mending: Al set out;
Of him we saw no more till just at noon
When he limped past the barn with a beetle-
maul
Over his shoulder, one eye swelling shut,
Cheeks puffed and bleeding, shirt and unionalls
In muddy ruin.

"Albert, what's the matter?"

"Big Jimmy Foye"——

"What angered Jimmy Foye?"

"He sulted us. I was a-makin' posts;
He come along there, and he lit his pipe,—
Insulted us!"

A Seducious Name

"But who began the fight?"

"He did! Began it! Yessuh suh, he did!
He call you alligronomist, an' you ain't!
You ain't no such,—it's a seducious name.
Three times I hit him with this old wedge-
smasher,
An' then begins the fight."

"H'm, did you lick him?"

"It's an ahmustus. He hearn his dinner bell;
Said they was havin' fresh pork chops for
dinner,—
So he went home.

"Next time I goin' to fix him!"

GEE-UP DAR, MULES

^{H.}
WE stood up in our khaki with the poise
Of perfect soldiership beneath the praise
Of the French officer. We caught the words
"Conspicuous courage," "bringing wounded
in,"
And "decorated with the Cross of War."

Black-faced? Yes, just a nigger. Nine months
since

He drove a span of bony cotton mules,
And never had been out of Jasper County
In Georgia, U. S. A.

They drafted him,
Shipped him to barracks, broke him into drill;
It was a changeling's life. I saw the lad
After his first three days in cantonment;
He had just finished polishing his teeth—
Novel achievement, and he swung the brush
With beat ecstatic, chanting joyously:

Gee-Up Dar, Mules

*"Lordy, lordy, got a toothbresh,
Lordy, lordy, got a toothbresh,
Lordy, lordy, got a toothbresh,
And I'll go to heaven on a-high!"*

Perhaps he sings now of the service, medal,
Or of some other meager badge or symbol
Out of that rich and shattering experience
Hurled round his simple soul. With hasty
hand,
Life sweeps a loaded vivifying brush
Over his old dull past.

And yet, I like
To think he will come back to Jasper County;
I picture him in patched and faded denims;
Over the wagon wheel he mounts the seat,
Evens the lines so the lead team won't jerk,
Then all together the four nervous mules
Will straighten tugs, dig in their toes, and pull.
She shakes, she creaks, she rolls!

"Gee-up dar, mules!"

*"General Foch is a fine old French,
He puts us niggers in a front-line trench;
The barb wire down, and the barrage be-
gun—*

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

*Boche see a nigger, and the Boche he run,
O po' mourner!
You shall be free
When the good Lord sets you free!*

*"Oh, I hitched up the mules, and the mules
worked fine;
I hitched 'em to that Hinnenburg line,
I drawed her back till I snagged her on the
Rhine,
An' the boss come along, an' he give me
my time.
O po' mourner!
You shall be free
When the good Lord sets you free!"*

"Gwan-n, mules! Gee-up dar, mules!"

WINTER DUSK

I
AND David—have you any word from
him?"
"No letter since he landed."

Day by day
She answers thus about her only son
With steady tone, while little tremblings move
In cheek and eye.

And now, in the early dusk,
She looks from her window through the falling
snow
On youthful lovers arm in arm, and hears
The music of their speech and their low
laughter.
"Davie,—my little Dave! Little Dave!"

II

She hears the frozen elm bough clash and
 strive;
Midnight is loud with the noise of the lunging
 gale,
And sleet against the pane. A dullness creeps
Over her willful nerves. Sleep opens wide
The door to anxious dreams: from hints con-
 fused,
Picture and print and rumor she builds up
The story of the trench and no man's land.
Always of David,—always thundering on
In frightful climax—till a choking gasp
Brings her with tremorous nerves and pound-
 ing heart
To hear the long twigs grate on the icy roof
As the wind lunges through the frozen elm.

HOURS IN A BYE-STREET

BYE-STREET

THIS is a bye-street; see the April shadows
Tenderly dripping on the sunny grass,
And listen to the undersong of the wind.

I'LL GO A PIECE WITH YOU

AT the stone cottage with the rose-lined
walk,
In after-supper chat one lingers on
While the last thrush is fluting, and the sun
Fades from the tallest maple. At the gate,
A loitering still,—communion will not end
For friendly souls,—and last, the welcome
words:
“I’ll go a piece with you. As far as the bridge,
Or Uncle Peter’s lane.”

The walk begins,
And the low words meant for one ear alone,
Intimate speech, and inmost confidence,
And thought not fully spoken,—understood,
Along the quiet road.

Then, in the soul,
Begins the after-sunset comforting
Of cooling airs and dewy fragrances,
Shadows and stars, until the budded boughs

I'll Go a Piece With You

Of all the spirit show their blossomings
Of tender beauty, while the night-moths hang
Above the honeysuckle, and the bats
Weave their uneasy web about the trees.

BY THE KITCHEN FIRE

BY the kitchen fire the goodman sits,
Drowsy and cosy;
By the kitchen fire the goodwife knits
While fades the winter day.

Her clack begins, she's scolding sore—
Frowning and scolding;
It's grab his hat, and it's bang the door,—
Away on the hill, away!

But the sleet it freezes cheek and chin,—
Shiver, shake, and shiver.
To the latch again, to the latch again,—
Have a care, a care!

"Goodman, what saw ye on the hill?"
"Sunset, the sunset;
The loud wind swung the flying cloud,
All crimson red and golden red,
The loud wind flung them at his will,—
Tomorrow will be fair."

The lamp is mellow, the housecat dreams,—
She smiles, the goodwife smiles;
The cloth is spread, the supper steams
By the kitchen fire.

MARCH WIND

THE moody wind—is this its grudge day?
Whoo!

Against the dusty sky, in the late sun,
A veering flock of mottled pigeons bounce
From the shoulders of a gust. In our village
street

The captious wind runs races with itself,
As a dog pursues its tail; with brute persistence
It buffets leafless elm and maple bough,
Tears at the stiff-armed oak.

From the window-pane
Little Fred looks for his father—he grew tired
Of playing outdoors with so rude a comrade;
For the wind hustles, keeps on pushing people,
Makes the street a barrier to neighboring
houses,
Besieges timid folk.

Now the reddish sun
Abandons the world to the wind. In alien twi-
light

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

He whistles at keyhole, hisses at the window,
Makes all the timbers groan, exults—cuwooff!

Our lamplight in the kitchen shudders, stag-
gers,
As Burton blows in from the writhing darkness,
And sets both knee and shoulder to the door
To force it shut.

“Hooray! I want my supper!
Good thing the trees are rooted! How the
draught
Reddens the stovepipe!”

Supper chat is over.
I look out; clouds are hurrying past the stars;
I listen to the rising talk of the wind;
Puff, pant, moan, roar, and wail. It flaps and
tugs
At fence and gate, it throws a wooden bench
Tumbling along the yard. I ask myself,
Has the wind any grudge against our house?

At bed-time it still rages. In the night
I lie and hear the creature—wiff, cuwooff!—
Rattling the sashes, bruising on the gable
The budding twigs of the elm.

March Wind

I move to the window:
My husband sleeps as men who labor sleep;
And Fred and Jimmie both lie full of
sleep.
Little Mabel stirs—is it that nerves of
women
Respond to the nerves of storms? Cuwiff,
cuwooff!

Unquiet stars. Dim leafless shapes of elm
Beating the dark between me and the stars;
Twisted at, jerked at, strained to the inmost
heart,
Surging at the roots, moaning in the angry
wind.

Why should this monster need the help of
night?
The rushing presence, with invisible bulk,
Has laid a heaving shoulder to my house:
The timbers strain, walls quiver, my heart
shakes.

A thump, a crash on the roof, the bouncing
slide
Of a brick—a dozen bricks—

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

“O Burton, say!—
It’s got the chimney! Bring the boys down
cellar!
I’m afraid of the wind in such a night! Come,
Mabel!
I’ll wrap you in this quilt!”

Cuwiff! Cuwooff!

QUEER NAME

MY thoughts are birds
In crimson maples
Talking of change:
"We go! Whither?"

I sit—I sit—
Effortless—effortless—
With fixity of eye
And restless hand.

On snow-wet wings
My thoughts are weary;
Lost, perishing,
Homeless birds.

This place has a name
Long and queer;
Queer name—
Hospital.

"OH—OH"

THE wind whistles,
The jays jeer;
Nine-year-old Lola is tired.

The thin face on the cot is tired,
Lying listening
To hushed tones,
Stifled coughing,
And muffled feet;
The rollicking blackbirds,
The cries of jays,
And the autumn wind
Worrying the trees.

From the smell of the room
To the windy lawn
A woman leads
A weeping woman.

Under a tree
Showered by blowing leaves,
They turn to the flattened stare of the
windows.

"Oh—Oh"

Eddying leaves
Purple and golden
Russet and yellow,
Race on the lawn.

The large woman
Sways moaning,—
Breaks into sobs,—
Arm-encircled:

"Oh—oh, oh—oh!
I don't want to live
If Lola dies!
Oh—oh!"

The wind whistles,
And jays jeer in the trees.

THE CHANGELING

SAM and Mary tease me,—
Hit them with my crutch.
Hitch along as hunchbacks do,
Crying overmuch:
Alone—I am alone.
And the trees they are so high.

Granny's mouth was muttering;
"Pity him," she said.
"They laid their crooked hands on him
In the cradle-bed;
They laid their crooked minds on him,
And better he were dead."
Alone—I lie alone,—
And the trees they are so high.

Her needles shine, her needles click,
Granny puffs her pipe;
Will not speak of fairy folk
In the candlelight,
Nor when the wind is lonely

The Changeling

In the growing night.

Alone—I lie alone,—

And the trees they are so high.

A dress is rustling graciously

Like young leaves in the dark;

With hawkmoth wing for coloring,

And firefly spark;

And cloudy dreams move over me

While fairy horns go by:

O little folk, my own folk,—

And—the trees they are so high.

We crush the riper moonbeams

In a cider press

With lilac leaf and cherry bloom,

Honeydew of grape perfume,

Elderberry blossom white,—

A witch-mist rolls along the ground,—

The owl hoots “Alone, alone.”

The trees they are so high.

Four and twenty dancers

Like grasses bending;

Four and twenty passion flowers

To music swaying, bending.

O little folk, and fairy folk,

And owl and dragonfly,— . . .

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

And leaden foot and light of day,
And beating heart and humping clay,—
And the trees they are so high.

Through laugh and jeer and mimicry
I hitch along the road;
“Monkeyface” and “Limpydog,”
And “Humpback Toad.”
My feeble crutch is broken,
My voice, the gray wind’s cry.
The fairy folk forget me,
And—the trees they are so high.

Note: If a changeling is left out under the trees the fairies may have pity and rue the bargain.

A HOUSE

GOOD-BYE to riding the wilderness
With my thoughts for company;
To the old new bed on the prairie grass,
A saddle to pillow me.

I will build me a house in the April sun
On my little garden ground;
My hand shall shape the rafter and beam,
My hammer stroke shall sound.

For a house is a house, and home is home,—
The roots of the soul go deep;
And I own the boards and the rusting nails
As I own my tears and my sleep.

Good-bye to riding the wilderness;
I build in the April sun.
Good-bye to the land of the lonely sky,—
My homeless days are done.

SONG

MUSIC,—
 O love, love,
A star in the early dusk,—
In me your tones, vibrant:
Moonlight,—
 O love, my white young love,
You in the moonlight, graceful, gracious,—
You are the young moonlight.

My thoughts run over with kisses,—
In my arms, you, the flower,—
 O love, young love.
My thoughts are me, and my thoughts are
 you:
Moonlight, music, a kiss, and you!
O young love, young love!

DECLARATION

I LOVE you . . .
But there is not any tone
Nor timing of the words upon the tongue
Nor string melodious that would not sound
Feverish, gesturous . . .

And if my hands
Were spirit hands the fingers of the wind
Might touch you easily and graciously
With a great meaning like a light of stars
Calming the afterglow . . .

And if our lips—
I love you . . . this is human love . . . I
love you.

THIS LITTLE WHILE

THE word that named a nation
Rots on some dusty scroll;
And Celt and Sax together lie
Beneath the burrowing mole:
The whole world-story vanishes,
A smoke-wraith in a gust,—
O love me, Love, this little while.

LOW VOICES

BEAT against me no more
Thoughts of my West
Lying along low hills and river valleys.
I remember four-footed things
With heads poised, listening;
And red children at play in the sun,
And windy rain
Over unfurrowed land,
And lovers singing.

Bruise me no more, beat against me no more,—
The wings of your wild birds bruise my dreams.
While moth and firefly fan the dusk
I remember the easy riders,
The loping ponies, the creak of leather,
And campfire light on boyish faces,
And low voices, low voices
Of windy rain in the long deep grass,
And lovers singing.

THE LAST GOODNIGHT OF BUCK-
HORSE JOHN

I TOOK my cards from the dealer's hand,
 An' I always paid up square;
I rode nightherd at the foreman's word,
 An' I done my killin' fair.

I straddled a job for old Curly Kent,
 I thought he was my friend;
But he sunfished to the right and left
 An' turned him end for end.

Now Curly's bones are bleaching
 Below a leafless limb;
And the crows have come to Buckhorse John
 Where the steers went over him.

THE LINE FENCE

IT was boots and spurs and hat and gun
In a hole by a willow tree;
And that is how we planted him
Where the line fence ought to be.

Bill left his gun at the town marshal
An' I at the livery;
An' I only had two jolts of gin
An' a little rye in me
When up come this Hyannis Hal
An' he wouldn't drink with me.

He snorted some an' cavorted some,
He slobbered an' wagged his chin;
An' he swore that he would wade in the gore
Of us an' all our kin!
"Roll up your pants, Hyannis,
An' come a-steppin' in!"

I got my gun from the livery,
An' Bill at the town marshal,
An' we was joggin' pleasantly

Barbed Wire and Wayfarers

Along the Wolf Creek trail;
An' at Warbonnet Springs rides out
This same Hyannis Hal.

Says I, "You missed the section line,
She's on my land five rod!"
"I put her there and there she stays
If I got to wade in blood!

"I'll wade in blood to my belt gets red,
I'll wade in blood to my chin!"
I answered back like a feller does
On a couple of jolts of gin:
It seemed like there was too much talk
So the doin's, they begin.

It was boots and spurs and hat and gun
In a hole by a willow tree;
And that was how we planted him
Where the line fence ought to be.

SWEET-GRASS RANGE

COME sell your pony, cowboy—
Sell your pony to me;
Braided bridle and your puncher saddle,
And spend your money free.

“If I should sell my pony,
And ride the range no more,
Nail up my hat and my silver spurs
Above my shanty door.

“And let my door stand open wide
To the snow and the rain and sun;
And bury me under the green sweet grass
Where you hear the river run.”

As I came down the sweet grass range
And by the cabin door,
I heard a singing in the early dusk
Along the river shore;

I heard a singing to the early stars,
And the tune of a pony's feet.
The joy of the riding singer
I never shall forget.

Note: For the pattern of this ballad *cf.*
“Rattlin’, Roarin’ Willie” by Burns.

UNFORGOTTEN

I WANT no stone, no patternings of flowers,
Nor mourning service delicately intoned
Beside the grave-hole;
In the restful earth
My body would lie down.

Old mysteries
Of blossoming grass and amorous wild flower
Shall come ungrieved,—
And mystery of you
Remembering me.

LATE DUSK

NOT yet farewell. For while the shadowy
creatures
Are chanting to the spirits of the dusk,
The old, loved road invites our fellowship;
I'll go a piece with you.

